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[VILLIERS Margaret Elizabeth
born 1914]



ERIC, PRINCE OF LORLONIA

OR

THE VALLEY OF WISHES





**HAVING PROCURED
TORCHES TO LIGHT
THEM DOWN THE
FLIGHTS OF STEPS.**

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ERIC

Prince of Lorlonia

OR

THE VALLEY OF WISHES

A FAIRY TALE OF
THE DAYS OF CHIVALRY

BY

THE COUNTESS OF JERSEY

AUTHOR OF "MAURICE, OR THE RED JAR."

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALICE R. WOODWARD

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND NEW YORK

1895

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LONDON AND BUNGAY.

Dedicated
TO
BEATRICE
AND
ARTHUR

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CHAPTER I

OLGA AND HER BROTHER

‘COME here, Princess Olga,’ cried the nurse, ‘your mama wants you.’

Olga was picking roses in the garden, but she ran as fast as her little legs could carry her towards the broad verandah, where she knew that she should find her mother.

The Princess of Lorlonia lay on a low couch supported by a pile of cushions, and her dark eyes looked all the darker because her face was so pale and thin. She smiled as Olga came near her and said :

‘Baby wants to be taken out of the cradle, Olga. Do you think that you can lift him?’

Olga was delighted. She had often held little Eric in her arms before, but she had never

been trusted to lift him out of his bed by her very own self.

‘You had better fetch your little chair first,’ continued her mother, ‘so that you can sit down beside me when you have him in your arms.’

Olga obeyed ; and having carefully arranged her little white and gold chair near her mother’s couch, she still more carefully bent over the cradle of carved ebony in which Eric was beginning to kick his legs and wave his arms, quite determined to show that he had been quiet for as long a time as could be expected of a sturdy boy nine months old. He smiled when he saw his sister and allowed her to take him up, and to sit down and amuse him with his coral and golden bells.

‘You must learn to take care of baby, Olga,’ said the Princess. ‘The day may come when he will be left in your charge.’

‘What do you mean, mama?’ asked the little girl, astonished.

‘Perhaps you cannot understand altogether, darling,’ answered her mother ; ‘but you know that when your father died little Eric became Prince of Lorlonia, and that all this part of the country belongs to him.’



**"YOU MUST LEARN
TO TAKE CARE OF
BABY . . . OLGA"
SAID THE PRINCESS.**

‘Yes, I know, mama, and I know that you are to take care of him till he is a big boy, and that then he is to take care of you.’

‘I will take care of him as long as I am alive, my child,’ said the Princess in a rather sad voice ; ‘but I may not live till he is a big boy. You are eleven years older than Eric, and if I die you must tell him that his father and mother wanted him to be a brave man, to speak the truth, and to take care of his people.’

‘You won’t die, my own mama,’ cried Olga ; ‘you will live to be an old, old woman, and then Eric and I will both take care of you.’

‘I hope I may live till you both grow up, but I do not know,’ said the lady. ‘Remember what I have said if I do not. Remember, also, that Eric and you are to live here with Count Radul and his wife, and that you are not to be taken away to any other castle or city as long as they can protect you here.’

‘I will remember, mama,’ replied the little girl gravely.

Eric here showed signs of impatience. He thought the conversation had lasted quite long enough, and that his mother and sister having settled his future to their satisfaction, ought to

attend to his present amusement. Olga got up and carried him towards some brilliantly flowering bougainvillea. The little boy stretched out his hands to the gay clusters, and crowed and laughed, till his nurse, summoned by the Princess's hand-bell, bore him away for his evening's meal and walk.

Olga ran back to her roses, for she had not picked all she needed to fill the bowls in her mother's room. Presently a clatter of horses' feet and jingling armour sounded on the broad road which lay below the terraced garden. This road was almost hidden from sight by a narrow plantation of myrtle and other shrubs, but from the end of the uppermost terrace a glimpse could be caught of any wayfarers who passed along it just before they turned to mount the hill on which the castle stood. Olga accordingly scampered to that post of observation, and then hurried back to her mother crying :

'Mama, mama ! Four knights and squires in armour and a dozen men-at-arms ! They are riding up to the castle, and I think the crest is Cousin Vladimir's vulture. It is an ugly bird like that, I am sure.'

Princess Anna turned, if possible, paler than

before, and murmuring to herself 'an ugly bird indeed,' rang her bell hastily, and said to Olga, 'Run in, dear ; send Amalia to me, and tell nurse to change your frock and comb your hair. Then come to my room. Go,' she added to the servant who answered the bell, 'ask Count Radul to hasten to meet the guests who are coming up to the castle, and beg the Countess to join me in the saloon.'

Amalia came and helped her mistress, who was very delicate, to go to her room and prepare to receive the unexpected visitors whoever they might be.

The castle was so remote from other dwellings of the same sort, and so entirely surrounded by the vast possessions of the Princes of Lorraine, that it was not usual in times of peace to keep sentries on the look-out, though a small garrison of armed retainers lived in the guard-house under the command of the late Prince's faithful vassal and friend, Count Radul.

The knights who were riding up to the outer gateway must have been known as friends of the family at the various outposts on the highways and bridle-paths leading to the castle, or they would not have been allowed to pass

unchallenged. Nevertheless the widowed Princess of Lorlonia knew only too well that some outward friends are more dangerous than open enemies, and she was more afraid of her husband's cousin, Count Vladimir, than of many of the wild chieftains or bandit leaders against whom the Prince had fought in his lifetime.

The Princess had just put on a black satin robe and Amalia was fastening a long veil of white lawn to her hair with a large diamond brooch, when a knock was heard at the door.

'Come in !' said the Princess ; and Countess Sophy Macovros, the wife of Count Radul, entered the room in some excitement.

'I ventured, Princess, to come to your chamber instead of to the saloon as you desired, for my husband thought that your Highness had better be prepared with the news that the stranger knights are Count Vladimir and his attendants.'

'Thank you, Countess ; I guessed as much, for Olga saw that the crest was like my cousin's. Has Count Radul met him ?'

'He is just greeting him at the entrance, and will take him for refreshment to the banquetting hall. He bade me say that he will await your

summons to conduct the Count to the saloon.'

'It is well, Countess. As soon as Olga comes we will go there.'

Olga, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement, and wearing a white satin frock with lace sleeves, now ran into the room, and her mother, leaning on the Countess's arm, descended to the saloon, where two young ladies, Xenia and Irene, who acted as maids of honour, and two pages, awaited her presence.

Countess Sophy led the lady to a large chair of state at the end of the room, and Olga seated herself on a little footstool at her right hand. One of the pages was then sent to tell Count Radul that the Princess was ready to receive her guests whenever they were sufficiently refreshed from the toils of their journey.

Not many minutes had elapsed before the attendants who were waiting outside the saloon threw open the large folding-doors, and the Seneschal Marco, an old man richly dressed in black velvet, with a long gold chain round his neck, advanced into the room and announced, 'The noble and valorous Lord, the Count Vladimir of Gravenia, has come to greet his well-

beloved cousin, the gracious and noble Lady Anna, Princess of Lorlonia, and her son, the high-born and mighty Prince of Lorlonia.' The seneschal struck the ground with his long white staff, his token of office, and stood aside to admit the Count so formally announced, who entered with Count Radul on his right hand, and followed by his own attendants and the other gentlemen who were acting as officers of the Princess's guard. Count Vladimir bowed low to his kinswoman, who rose as he came forward, and said,

'Welcome, Cousin Vladimir. I am glad to see you at Lorlonia. Had you given me notice I would have received you more fittingly.'

'I ask no other greeting, dear cousin, than to see you well. And is this my dear little Olga?' he added, stooping to kiss the child, who submitted politely, but without much pleasure.

'Yes, this is Olga,' replied her mother. 'Will you sit down, cousin?' She pointed to a chair near her own, and the Count sat down. Count Radul and his wife, at a sign from the Princess, also seated themselves; Xenia and Irene remained in the background, and the other

attendants conversed together at the lower end of the room.

Count Vladimir, a tall dark man with restless eyes, did not seem entirely at his ease. He explained that he had been suddenly summoned to the Capital, where the King was calling a council of his chief vassals, in order to discuss some points connected with the defence of the kingdom. He then continued,—

‘I was on a visit in this neighbourhood, and I could not pass near your castle, my dear cousin, without calling to pay my respects, and to offer my services as representing the interests of my dear little cousin Eric at the Council.’

‘Thank you, Cousin Vladimir,’ answered the Princess rather coldly. ‘It is very thoughtful of you, but I have no need to trouble you with the care of any interests except your own. The lands of Lorlonia pay a certain annual sum to his Majesty and are free from further charge or burden. Count Radul Macovros looks after their defence, and my son’s other officers see that the laws of his land are carried out. When Eric is old enough he may choose to follow the King to the wars, but meantime the council cannot affect him or

his interests in any way. The King loved his father, and will certainly not try to interfere with the rights of the son.'

'Certainly, certainly, dear Anna,' said Vladimir, with an annoyance which he vainly tried to hide under a show of affection. 'Allow me, however, to say that ladies do not always understand the concerns of courts and kings. Circumstances alter cases, and his Majesty or his advisers may wish to ask more from Lorlonia either in men or money than was formerly given. It would be of great advantage to your son if I, as his kinsman, were to receive your authority to speak for him in the Council.'

'I am not at all afraid of demands from the King, Cousin Vladimir,' replied the Princess quietly; 'and if his Majesty had any communication to make he would send me a messenger direct, by whom I should send a direct answer. Circumstances, as you justly remark, alter cases, and I should like to know full particulars of any case which might arise before authorising anybody, even a relation, to speak in my name and my son's.'

Vladimir frowned darkly, while Count Radul looked on the ground to hide a smile of satis-

faction. He understood very well why Count Vladimir wanted permission to speak in Eric's name. The Count thought that he would bribe the King and council with offers of men and money from his little cousin's lands, and that, in return, rights would be given him over the whole country of Lorlonia, that he would be appointed guardian during the boy's infancy, and perhaps contrive in the end to make himself master in his place. Both Count Vladimir and Count Radul, however, knew that the Princess spoke truly. The King had been a great friend of the late Prince's, he respected his widow, and would not listen to any one who did not speak, in the first instance at all events, with her authority.

'Well, my lady,' said Vladimir after a pause, trying to speak in a gay and cheerful manner, 'since you will not allow me to act a kinsman's part towards my little cousin, will you at least allow me to see him?'

'Certainly,' replied the Princess, relieved that the Count gave up the argument so readily. 'George,' added she, beckoning to one of the pages, 'go and bid Nania bring Prince Eric here.'

‘Let me go,’ exclaimed Olga jumping up, and throwing her arms round her mother’s neck she whispered, ‘I want to see that nurse puts on his right frock.’

‘Very well;’ answered her mother smiling, and the little girl ran off. The seneschal watched her proceedings with considerable disapproval. Though very fond of his little Princess he did not think that she ought to run messages in the presence of strangers, and he took care that the attendants should be ready to throw the doors wide open when she returned with her brother and his nurse, while he himself marched into the room wielding his white staff with added importance, and announcing in a voice of unwonted solemnity, ‘The Highborn Noble and Mighty Eric, Prince of Lorlonia, Count of Mandania, Hospodar of Tortosima, and Lord Paramount of all the Cities, Towns and Territories between the Mountains of Vassilos and the River Mitrovek.’

The poor little Prince, Count, Hospodar and Lord Paramount looked almost appalled at the recital of his own dignities and at the stately manner in which the assembly rose and saluted at his entrance. The sight of his

mother however reassured him, and he looked round pleased with the jingle of the swords and spurs, the flashing of the helmets carried by the knights and men-at-arms, and the glitter of the breast-plates which they wore.

‘He is a soldier’s son,’ said Count Radul, ‘and knows a soldier when he sees him.’

Count Vladimir, who, during Olga’s absence, had been talking to the Princess and Countess Sophy about his journey and the beauty of the surrounding country, now rose hastily and tried to take the baby from Nania.

The little fellow would not allow this. He did not cry but, pushing his cousin away with his tiny hand, held out both arms to Count Radul, and insisted with energetic movements that he should take him and carry him to his mother. Seated on her lap he broke into a cheerful smile, and seemed thereby to respond to the greetings of the company.

Count Vladimir turned away with a forced laugh and remarked to the Princess, ‘Your boy is a fine child, but does not know his friends.’

‘Indeed he does,’ broke in Olga, ‘Eric loves every one who loves him.’

‘He does not love me, Olga,’ replied the Count.

‘Well, you see, he can’t know yet whether you love him,’ retorted the little girl.

‘Hush, Olga,’ said her mother, ‘your cousin quite understands that Eric is a baby and will learn in time to behave properly.’

‘I hope he will learn both to know me and to love me,’ remarked the Count.

After a little further conversation the Princess and her children retired, the Princess begging that her cousin would excuse her presence at supper as she was not strong enough for late hours.

Count and Countess Macovros attended her to the door of her own apartments, and as they went back to the saloon the former muttered to his wife, ‘It will be a good thing for the family if they all know friend from foe as quickly as little Eric.’

‘You don’t think the Count will do the child any harm, do you?’ whispered the Countess, alarmed by his manner.

‘He shall not have the chance if I can help it,’ returned her husband. ‘But hush! walls have ears when there are strangers in the house.’

Meantime Count Vladimir had called his favourite squire, the red-haired and crafty Nicholas, to look at the view from the large window at the end of the saloon. As they stood together in the recess he murmured in an angry tone,

‘The brat is as obstinate as his mother. I wish I had him in my power !

CHAPTER II

VLADIMIR TAKES ADVICE

THE castle of Lorlonia was in reality a stately palace of black and white marble solidly built, and surrounding a paved courtyard, in the midst of which played a beautiful fountain supplied from a water-tower, which also served as a post of observation for the watchmen in times of war or danger.

An arcade with alternate columns of black and white marble ran round three sides of the court, on the fourth was a wide entrance with elaborately wrought bronze gates, opening on to a broad gravelled terrace with a smooth lawn beyond.

Except where the ground was artificially levelled, the hill on which the castle was

erected sloped gradually away in all directions. On two sides it was laid out in gardens and pleasure-grounds, the third was covered with stables and outbuildings of various kinds, and up the northern approach wound, amidst oak and chestnut trees, the broad road by which Vladimir had arrived on his visit to his cousin's home.

The whole hill where it reached the plain was encircled by a high stone wall with small fortified guard-towers at intervals. Travellers from the south-west entered through an archway protected by a portcullis, and passed along the foot of the western garden from which Olga had first caught sight of the men-at-arms.

Vladimir, whose temper was not improved by his failure to obtain the object of his visit, refused to spend more than one night at the castle, and at an early hour on the morning following his arrival assembled his troop on the terrace outside the bronze gates.

Princess Anna, who was anxious not to offend him more than possible, came out to say good-bye, holding by the hand Olga, whose golden curls were shining brightly in the morning sunlight. Nania stood near with little Eric in her arms. The boy was enchanted by

the sight of so many horses and soldiers, and in high good humour even consented to shake hands with his dark-browed cousin. 'Good-bye, young man,' said Vladimir, 'and take my advice. If people in this world offer you friendship, don't refuse it. There is not so much spare kindness going begging.'

'I hope neither Eric nor I shall ever refuse friendship, cousin Vladimir,' said the Princess. 'Certainly not that of our kinsmen. We shall always be glad to see you here, and we wish you a prosperous journey.'

'Good-bye, my lady Olga,' said the Count turning to her. 'What do you wish me?'

'I wish you to love Eric really and truly,' replied the little girl earnestly.

'Teach Eric to love me then,' said the knight laughing; and kissing the hand of the Princess he vaulted on his horse, Count Radul brought him the stirrup-cup, and after pledging the company at large, he returned the golden goblet with a final bow, and rode away.

'Nicholas,' said he, as the heavy portcullis of the south-western archway fell behind them, 'methinks fair means have failed to gain our ends. What is to be our next move?'

‘I hardly know, my lord. You have many friends on the King’s council. Would they not support you if you applied directly to be made guardian of the little Prince?’

‘Perhaps they might, but it would be of little use. The council has nothing to do with Lorlonia and its Prince. The whole thing depends on the King himself. He will believe anything Princess Anna says, and do anything she wishes.’

‘You are the nearest relation, my lord, and must succeed to the Principality if anything should happen to the child.’

‘There is Olga—but a girl might be more easily managed if the boy and his mother were out of the way.’

‘Princess Anna cannot live long.’

‘No, but you will see. She will leave the boy in charge of that impertinent fellow, Radul Macovros. He behaves already as if he were lord of the castle. I am certain that she has spoken to the King about it, and probably to all the neighbouring Counts and Hospodars. Most of them are friends or relations of her own.’

Nicholas was silent for a few minutes, and then said :

‘My lord, I hardly see how open force or open policy will help us.’

‘I did not suppose you would,’ retorted his leader : ‘have you anything that is not open to suggest ? We are not talking in the market-place.’

Nicholas looked cautiously behind him. The other squires were talking and laughing together well out of earshot. They were fully aware that their lord did not care for interruption when conferring with his favourite. The men-at-arms and baggage mules were following at a still more respectful distance.

‘It is all right,’ said the Count impatiently, ‘those fools are not listening. What is this desperate secret ? Have you contrived to bribe any of my cousin’s people ?’

‘Not a chance of that I am afraid, my lord. They have too comfortable quarters, and too easy a time of it, with a lady and a baby to rule them.’

‘Afraid of having to go out and fight like men, I suppose—the cowards !’ exclaimed Vladimir. ‘Well, then, let’s hear—what is your famous plan ?’

‘My lord, did you ever hear of the pink marble quarries of Lorlonia ?’

‘Hear of them? I should think so. They bring in a golden harvest every year to that lucky brat, as they did to his father before him. What of them?’

‘Some of them lie not far from the road by which we travel to-morrow, and we might turn aside to visit them if your lordship pleased.’

‘Why should I please? Do you hope to corrupt the quarrymen?’

‘I beg your pardon, my lord. I am afraid you will laugh at me.’

‘I shall make you laugh on the wrong side of your mouth if you don’t get on quicker with what you have to say. What have quarries and quarrymen to do with my claims on Lorlonia?’

‘Well, my lord,’ continued Nicholas, speaking more quickly, ‘three or four miles beyond the quarries, which are surrounded with a little workmen’s town, there is a vast deserted city, with temples and palaces all complete, built entirely of this precious pink marble. There are houses and baths, beautiful fountains and groves of orange and almond trees, yet no man, woman, or child of the workmen’s town will go to live in these palaces, or even wander in the gardens.’

‘Well—what of it? Do you propose that I should seize the marble city and make it my capital?’ sneered Vladimir. ‘Is this your cunning plan when open force and open policy fail?’

‘Not exactly, if your lordship will have patience. The marble city is abandoned and avoided because the country people say that it is haunted.’

‘Haunted! what nonsense!’ cried Vladimir contemptuously.

‘Perhaps it is nonsense,’ continued Nicholas, ‘but I have known wise men who thought quite the contrary.’

‘And what was the wise men’s story?’ asked his master.

‘They say that every palace, temple, and garden is inhabited by little white dwarfs, the subjects of a magician who threw some spell over the place centuries ago. The dwarfs sleep by day in secret chambers but at night they throng the city, feast and work and follow all the occupations of mankind. Their master is seldom seen, but if any one has the courage to lie down to sleep in the Great Hall of the principal palace on Midsummer Eve the dwarfs will lead him to their master and he will answer



**"I SUGGEST
NOTHING,
MY LORD."**

three questions and give counsel which never fails. Some add that none can succeed in this quest save those who are akin to the Princes of Lorlonia.'

'You expect a reasonable man to believe this tale! And even if it were true, what then?'

'To-morrow,' remarked Nicholas quietly, 'will be Midsummer Eve.'

'And you suggest that I should spend the night in your precious city?'

'I suggest nothing, my lord. It occurred to me that your lordship might care to visit the famous pink marble quarries of Lorlonia since you were in the neighbourhood, and this reminded me of a legend not unconnected with your family. No doubt the superintendent of the quarries would be pleased to show you hospitality, but if the works would not interest you there is an end of the matter.'

The Count made no answer. Nicholas fell a little behind, and when next his lord spoke it was on quite a different subject. That evening the Count and his retainers slept at a little country inn. At supper Vladimir asked the landlord who attended him whether the quarries of pink marble were worth a visit.

‘Assuredly, noble lord,’ replied the man. ‘All who see them say there are none like them in the world. They are called the Rose Quarries, for the marble has veins as delicate as a blush rose, and it glows like pearls and opals. If your Excellency should please to stop to-morrow on your way to Mandania, which is our Prince’s frontier town, as your Excellency knows, the master of the Rose Quarries would be proud to show them to his Highness’s kinsman.’

‘Then they lie between here and the frontier? Could I inspect them, and push on, to sleep at Mandania to-morrow night?’

‘Not well, noble Count; they lie a little off the high road and it would take some hours to see all their marvels. If your Excellency pleases, I will send a messenger to Master Jagietto at daybreak and bid him prepare a lodging for all your noble party.’

‘Do so, good man. Tell him that one of the sheds or quarrymen’s huts will be all that we need.’

Nicholas grinned to himself but said nothing. The whole population of the little workmen’s town was astir when the gaily armed train rode up soon after noon on Midsummer Eve, and

Jagietto, Master of the Rose Quarries, received his Prince's cousin with all possible respect and courtesy.

The quarries were very extensive and gave employment to a large number of men who lived with their families in little huts scattered all over the mountain side. At the foot, on the banks of a smoothly flowing river, were more substantially built houses, belonging to the foremen, tradesmen, and other of the richer inhabitants.

The river had wharves on its banks against which were fastened rafts and flat-bottomed boats, in readiness to take away the blocks of marble to other towns and seaports.

Vladimir was shown all the wonders of the place, the quarries themselves where men were boring and splitting the rocks with crowbars and pickaxes, the yards where the huge masses were hewn into shapes more convenient for transport, and the workshops where the finer specimens were prepared by skilled workmen for their final destination as columns and other ornaments for the palaces of kings and nobles.

The marble was indeed marvellously beautiful, and when smoothly polished was more

like some lovely pink pearl than the solid material used for buildings and pavements.

‘Now,’ said Jagietto, ‘your Excellency has seen all our work-a-day premises. Will you be gracious enough to come to our Rose Hall where we have made ready some refreshment?’

Vladimir was getting very hungry and was only too glad to follow his guide through a long gallery leading from one of the quarries right into the side of a hill. When he again issued into daylight he could not refrain from a cry of astonishment. He found himself in a large circular chamber, open at the top to the sky, but surrounded entirely by walls of the finest pink marble fancifully adorned with representations of animals, flowers, ferns, trees, and waterfalls.

‘Yes,’ said Jagietto with an air of pride and satisfaction, ‘from this part of the mountain we quarry the most beautiful marble, and when the middle of this pit had been cleared out, the great-grandfather of our present Prince gave orders that the walls should be left standing, dressed and polished, just to show what our mines could produce. Since then our best workmen in their spare time have amused

themselves by carving all these pictures on the walls, and now I don't believe there is such another hall in the world as ours.'

'I should think not indeed,' replied Vladimir, who was only too anxious to flatter his little cousin's subjects with smooth words and compliments, and whose good humour was certainly increased by the sight of a plentiful banquet spread on a marble table and surrounded by marble seats. While they were eating, the Count asked the superintendent many questions about the works and the extent of the quarries, and Jagietto, pleased with his apparent interest, gave him all the information in his power.

'Yes,' he said, 'your Excellency must have seen many castles and palaces enriched with our marble. I often grieve that his Highness's own castle of Lorlonia was built before these quarries were opened. Our pink would be much handsomer than the black and white of which it is constructed.'

'Surely,' said Vladimir, 'this rose marble was known long before the Castle of Lorlonia was built? Have I not heard of some very fine buildings now no longer in use, which lie just beyond these quarries and are all made of this

beautiful marble? If I had time I should rather like to visit them.'

'Ah well,' replied Jagietto, 'there are a few deserted houses which some people call the Rose City, but I would not advise your Excellency to waste your time in going there. The path is exceedingly rough, in fact impassable for horses, and no one lives in the place. It is true that some marble like ours must have been used in building there, but probably it was picked up accidentally, and then the whole thing was forgotten till Prince Hetgar's time. Let me give your lordship some of this venison.'

Jagietto was evidently anxious to drop the subject, and Vladimir, who had learnt all that he wanted to know, did not wish to continue a conversation which might have enlightened his followers, so he accepted the venison and began to talk about hunting.

One of the workshops near the entrance to the principal quarry had been hastily prepared as a lodging for the men-at-arms, and Jagietto invited the Count, Nicholas, and the two other squires to sleep at his own house.

Vladimir requested that Nicholas might

share his room, which he was satisfied to find was on the ground floor and had large windows opening into the garden. He said he was very tired and asked Jagietto to allow him to retire to his chamber as soon as the sun had set. An hour later when all was quiet in the Master's house, two figures crept stealthily through the little garden and crossed the small strip of level ground lying between the workmen's town and the marble mountains.

'Are you sure that you know the way?' asked one impatiently.

'I made careful inquiry, my lord,' replied the other, 'and the men told me that none cared to follow yonder dark path between the two peaks. Wise men may take the road which fools fear.'

'And fall into dangers which fools avoid,' retorted his chief. Nevertheless he followed on. Presently the path became nothing but a track, rough with fallen stones and hard to trace by the dim light of the stars, for the moon was not yet risen.

'There is no path at all,' exclaimed the Count, after another hour or so of hard walking. 'Your city is a mere fool's dream.'

‘Does your lordship choose to return?’ asked Nicholas calmly. ‘Yonder are walls and columns, perchance there is no oracle behind them, and it would be lost labour to proceed.’

‘Since we have come so far we may as well see the business out,’ replied the Count in a somewhat surly tone ; and Nicholas with a grim smile scrambled over the mass of rock which formed a kind of final barricade between the narrow pass and an open plain on the other side.

In this plain, which stretched away to the west, but was bounded on the south by a great forest, and on the east by another ridge of mountains, rose the dark walls and stately roofs which the sharp eyes of the squire had detected from a distance. Just as the Count gained his side the full moon arose over the mountain-tops, and, sailing silently into the cloudless sky, poured a flood of light with sudden and startling illumination over the deserted mansions of the Rose City.

CHAPTER III

THE ROSE CITY

IF the marble banqueting-hall of Prince Hetgar had looked beautiful in the golden sunlight, far more lovely appeared the city whose roseate walls caught and threw back the silver radiance of the moon. Right and left the crimson ramparts stretched, their smooth surface broken at regular intervals by stately columns, whose rounded form made them appear rather paler than the marble on which they cast their shadows, and whose delicate veins could be clearly traced in the mystical light.

Just in front of the strangers there was a wide opening in the wall, where gates had doubtless hung in olden times, but which now afforded an unimpeded view into the very heart

of the city. A broad avenue ran directly from it, having on either side a row of colossal statues of kings and warriors, each holding in his hand a sword, a spear, or a sceptre. Behind these appeared splendid buildings with domes, colonnades, and slender towers, and at the end of the avenue could be seen a vast portico which was evidently the entrance to the chief palace of the city. Every statue, every column, every building was built of the same pure marble, whose almost transparent texture glowed and varied from the deepest crimson to the palest possible shade of pink, and the richly carved ornaments with which the whole was adorned seemed in very deed to be framed of newly-opened roses. The dark shadows cast by the statues appeared as if thrown by living guardians of the city, and, bold as Vladimir undoubtedly was, his heart beat somewhat faster as he looked at the silent path along which he was shortly to tread

‘Now, my lord,’ said Nicholas, ‘if you wish to consult the oracle you must go forward alone. The Master of the White Dwarfs will only receive one inquirer at a time; if two go together, though they may hear sounds, no form

will appear to them and no voice will answer their questions.'

'You are more ready to send me into a trap than to walk into it yourself, Nicholas, methinks,' said Vladimir.

There was an angry flash in the squire's eye, but he answered in his usual smooth voice, 'Just as your lordship pleases. I am quite ready to ask three questions on my own account if you prefer to let me go in your stead, though, as I have not the honour of belonging to your lordship's family, it is doubtful whether I should get an answer.'

'And if I bade you ask the questions for me?'

'It would be useless. The Master answers each man for himself, not for another.'

'Well, then, stay here and wait for me. I fear neither dwarf nor soothsayer, but I care little to be the dupe of man or magic.'

So saying the Count waved his hand to his follower as a sign to remain outside, and hurrying forward, passed the gateway and trod firmly up the avenue. Nicholas looked after him. 'Wise men must serve fools, I suppose,' muttered he, 'but they will ask their share of the spoil, and, if possible, avoid the danger;' and

wrapping his cloak around him, he sat down with his back against a rock to await his lord's return.

He saw him pass the statues without looking up at one of them, but it seemed to him as if the sculptured chiefs bent their heads and frowned at the intruder. At length the Count paused on the steps of the portico for a moment, then he advanced yet more boldly, mounted to the platform at the top, and entering a narrow doorway, disappeared from the sight of his squire.

A strange spectacle greeted Vladimir when he had passed the doorway. He found himself in a spacious hall, perfect in every part, for the lapse of ages did not appear to have affected the Rose City in the smallest degree. Neither weather nor the hand of man had displaced a single block of marble, nor injured one carved leaf in the mass of ornament around. The centre part of the hall was paved with rich pink and white mosaic representing festivals and hunting-scenes, and was surmounted by a high dome of rock crystal, through which the moon-beams fell in broken rays. This dome was supported by pillars, each twisted into some

quaint and novel shape, and between the pillars and the outer walls of the hall was a wide corridor, roofed and floored with sculptured marble and raised several feet above the mosaic pavement.

The corridor was prepared as if for a feast, soft silken cushions were scattered in all directions, gorgeous curtains woven with threads of gold and silver were looped to the pillars, and from pillar to pillar all round the hall were festooned garlands of fresh roses. At intervals were placed little silver tables only a few inches high, and against the walls were fastened silver sconces bearing torches of sweet-smelling wood. The torches were not lighted and no food was as yet placed upon the tables.

‘Well,’ said Vladimir to himself, ‘whoever occupies this palace has some idea of making himself comfortable. I incline to suspect that the whole city is the head-quarters of a band of robbers who give out that it is haunted in order to keep intruders at a distance. What shall I do now? If they find me here the chances are that they will kill me as the surest way of making me hold my tongue. Shall I go back? That impudent fellow Nicholas will laugh at me to himself and his companions even if he dare

not do so to my face. Besides, I should like to see the owners of all this property. They keep it in excellent repair anyhow. White dwarfs! Those tables look about the size for dwarfs, but it must be all nonsense. Yet how could robbers, or indeed any mortals, live here and never be seen by the quarrymen? Perhaps Jagietto knows all about it and is paid to keep quiet. Well, I will know the truth somehow. Sleep here? Lie down to sleep I think was the condition. It would be difficult to sleep in these strange quarters. I suppose I can help myself to a few of these cushions.' So saying the Count picked up half-a-dozen, carried them to the darkest corner of the corridor, arranged them as a bed, and lay down.

All was silent; even the night wind rustling the orange-trees in the orchards, and the musical fall of the fountains which he had heard as he walked up the avenue, did not reach him here. He shut his eyes, thinking that possibly the unseen inhabitants expected that of him, but he heard nothing. He opened them again and watched the moonbeams falling on the pavement—still nothing. He began once more to

think over the questions he should ask the master of the White Dwarfs if he ever made his acquaintance, and so thinking he became really drowsy and closed his eyes without meaning to do so.

Ah! what was that? Vladimir roused himself in haste and leaned on his elbow. Had he been asleep? was he dreaming? Silence still, yet no longer solitude. The hall was thronged with little beings, men and women no bigger than children of four or five years old, with perfectly white faces, clear blue eyes, hair of the palest yellow, and clothes made of white silk trimmed with white swansdown. All the tables were now spread with food and wine, and every torch was lighted, shedding a dazzling lustre and delicious odours.

As the Count looked on amazed all the little white people rose to their feet, one who seemed to be leader of the ceremonies gave a signal, soft music played, and the whole assembly sang in chorus as follows,

Many a chieftain and many a knight
Loved his lady and faced his foes,
Feasted where flowers and lamps shone bright
In the Crimson City, the Hall of the Rose.

Years wheel onward, valour is vain
Spells to scatter the Master throws,
Never shall beauty her sway regain
In the Crimson City, the Hall of the Rose.

Years roll onward and ours the home,
Trees that blossom and stone that glows,
Where silver light through the crystal dome
Floods the Crimson City, the Hall of the Rose.

He is dreaming, we guard his sleep ;
Mighty Master ! 't is he who knows
How we, his servants, our vigil keep
In the Crimson City, the Hall of the Rose.

‘Now,’ said the leader as the voices died away, ‘sit and feast, White Dwarfs of the Rose City. This is Midsummer Eve, and though our lord slumbers as is his wont he bids you make merry.’

‘May none come to disturb our feast to-night then,’ remarked a rather cross-looking dwarf who sat at the same table with the first speaker. ‘If there is one thing which I dislike more than another, it is when a tiresome inquisitive mortal comes asking questions and wanting answers.’

‘You have not to give the answers, Repan,’ cried another, ‘so what can it matter to you?’

‘Besides,’ added a fourth, ‘we frightened the

last man who came so thoroughly that I don't think we have had any one here for three years.'

'If mortals were wise they would keep their questions to themselves,' said a very sapient-looking dwarf. 'I never knew any good come of the answers they get.'

'That is only because they don't understand them and don't know how to use them,' rejoined a lady dwarf; 'but then mortals are densely stupid.'

'Is it true that no one can get an answer from the master unless he belongs to the family of the Princes of Lorlonia?' asked one.

'I am not quite certain,' replied the president, 'but I believe that our lord is obliged to answer the Princes of Lorlonia and their kindred, while he can do as he pleases if any one else ventures into his presence.'

'Then,' exclaimed Vladimir, suddenly rising and advancing towards the table at which this conversation was carried on, 'take me to your master. I am cousin to the Prince of Lorlonia, this is Midsummer Eve, and I demand answers to three questions.'

'Not so fast;' replied the president, rising to his feet with an air of great composure, and

waving his hand. In an instant every torch was extinguished, and as a cloud passed over the moon at the same moment the hall was wrapped in darkness.

Immediately at least a dozen dwarfs threw themselves upon the indignant Count and fastened his hands and feet tightly with cords. Not till this was done did the president speak again or make any answer to Vladimir's angry protests.

'Throw him on the ground and sit upon him,' was his next order, and five or six dwarfs carried out the first injunction, while several more obeyed the second and placed themselves upon the prisoner's arms, legs, and chest with evident satisfaction to themselves and much inconvenience to their victim.

'Now, sir, who are you, and what right have you as a spy in our banqueting-hall?' demanded the president with a very severe air.

'I am Count Vladimir of Gravenia, and as I told you before I am cousin to the Prince of Lorlonia!' gasped the furious noble. 'I am not a spy. Do you think I want to see your trumpery feast, or that you will frighten me with your silly conjuring tricks? I heard you say yourself that your master, whoever he may

be, is bound to answer the kinsmen of Lorlonia, so take me to him without more delay, or the armies of our house shall come and batter down your wretched city.'

'You may or may not be related to the Princes of Lorlonia,' returned the president very calmly, while the dwarfs who were using the Count as a seat indulged in a few private kicks, 'I should not, however, have guessed it by your manners, and since you listened to our conversation you are certainly a spy. As to armies, they might batter for months and they would make little difference to a city which has stood here for centuries. Nevertheless, this is Midsummer Eve, and I will take my master's pleasure concerning you. Meantime, as you have interrupted my friends at their banquet, they may get what amusement they can out of you while I am away.'

So saying he left the hall, and the cloud rolling away from the moon gave the mischievous dwarfs light enough to fall upon the unfortunate Count, and they forthwith proceeded to pinch him, beat him, and even kick him from one to another as an unwieldy football. His struggles and remonstrances were

alike in vain, and he felt like a battered mass when the return of the president put a stop to this lively game.

‘Our master is graciously pleased to desire your presence, so get up and follow me,’ said the dwarf. ‘I advise you to try and behave with the courtesy becoming the rank which you claim. You can untie his hands and feet,’ he added, addressing Vladimir’s late tormentors, who appeared unwilling to let him go.

The cords were slowly unfastened and the freed prisoner struggled to his feet, scowling fiercely on all around, but afraid to express his wrath in words lest the attack should be renewed.

‘Now come,’ said the leader rather impatiently, and taking a torch he entered a long narrow passage which issued from one corner of the hall, and seemed to have no light from the outer air.

Bruised and sore the Count stumbled after him, dimly guided by the flickering torch, and presently arrived in another hall smaller than that which they had left. From this a staircase ascended to an upper story and brought them to yet another long dark passage.



THE OLD MAN
SOLEMNLY RAISED
HIS RIGHT HAND.

‘Where are we going? You are leading me into some pitfall!’ exclaimed the Count.

‘Keep quiet if you don’t want to be pitched head foremost over the parapet,’ retorted the dwarf, emerging from the corridor on to a marble terrace surrounded by a kind of marble lattice carved as delicately as ivory fret-work. In the centre of the terrace was a canopy of silver supported by eight silver columns, and beneath it, on a couch covered with cloth of gold, lay a very old man with a long white beard.

A dwarf stood near each column swinging a censer of perfume, while three others crouched at the head, and three at the foot of the bed, slowly waved large fans of ostrich feathers to and fro, that a soft scented breeze might refresh the sultry night.

Was the old man sleeping or waking? His eyes were closed and Vladimir could not tell, till a hollow voice said—

‘Let him approach;’ and his guide, who evidently disliked him, pushed him roughly forward.

As he drew near to the couch the old man solemnly raised his right hand, and the Count saw

on his forefinger an enormous diamond set in a massive silver ring. Somewhat to his surprise he perceived his own face clearly reflected in the diamond.

‘It is well,’ said the old man; ‘the mortal who disturbs my rest is of the princely house. Let him ask his three questions and begone.’

Taken almost unawares in spite of his previous preparation, the Count mustered his courage and his wits as well as he could, and asked in a tolerably firm voice—

‘Who shall be Prince of Lorlonia?’

‘He who will win it by a wish and hold it by the love of his people,’ replied the sage.

‘That does not tell me much. It might be I or another,’ muttered the Count to himself, and then asked aloud,

‘What shall happen to Prince Eric?’

‘His fate lies in the hand of a girl,’ was the answer.

‘I don’t see much good in being pounded to a jelly for this information,’ was the discontented thought of the inquirer. ‘I must get something more to the purpose out of the old fellow this time.’

After a moment’s pause he said, ‘I was told,

Father, that you give counsel which never fails. Deign to tell me how I may win and wear the princely diadem of Lorlonia?’

Very slowly and distinctly came the answer—
‘Beyond the mountains which lie to the east of the Rose City is the Valley of Wishes, where every wish uttered by men, women and children during the past twelve months takes form on New Year’s Day. Whoever can first cross the stream which flows at the foot of those mountains on the further side of the Black Gorge, after the Great Bell of this city has tolled the passing of the Old Year, may choose amongst his wishes that which he will have fulfilled. No more. Leave me to rest. The Great Bell tolls and Midsummer Day is here.’

Before Vladimir could speak, or question the old man further, a deafening sound broke upon his ears. One—two—three, tolled out into the night, and ere the twelfth clash of the mighty bell had sounded he fell senseless on the pavement.

When he opened his eyes again he was lying near the rocks outside the City and Nicholas was bending over him.

CHAPTER IV

OLGA FINDS A FRIEND

IT was the first day of August, and the sun shone gloriously on the Castle of Lorlonia, yet all within it were sad. Princess Anna had died a week before, and the vassals of the Princedom had been assembled in the castle to escort her to her grave. Now many of them had gone home, after again swearing fealty to the little Eric, and solemnly confiding him and Olga to the guardianship of Count Radul Macovros and his wife, in accordance with the wishes of the dead Princess. Six of the principal nobles were chosen as a Council of Regency to look after the affairs of the State until he came of age, and each of these in turn was to pay a monthly visit to the castle, to see that little Eric was well and properly tended.

Vladimir was one of the six, and he and a few others still stayed on at the castle, saying that they could not leave the little orphans quite so soon, and would remain a few days to cheer them up.

Poor little Olga, who had cried till she was tired, was sitting in the garden with Countess Sophy Macovros, and Nania was walking up and down carrying Prince Eric, who could not understand why all around him wore black clothes and looked so dull, and why he did not see his mama.

‘What shall we do, Countess Sophy?’ exclaimed Olga, leaning her head against her friend, ‘Cousin Vladimir pretends to be fond of us, but I never can like him, and I am sure he does not like Eric—and he won’t go away and leave us alone.’

‘He will go in a few days, dear,’ replied the Countess, putting her arm round the little girl. ‘It is quite natural that he should wait to see everything settled before he leaves.’

‘Xenia says he is always walking up and down the dark avenue plotting with Nicholas, and sometimes Sir Witold was with them before he left, and she is sure they are up to some mischief.’

‘Xenia cannot possibly know anything about it, and ought not to frighten you. Besides Jagellon, the Hospodar of Dorzyn, who was one of your father’s greatest friends, is here, and means to stay as long as Count Vladimir is in the castle.’

Olga was silenced though not convinced, and at this minute Irene, a tall fair girl who had, like Xenia, been lady-in-waiting to Princess Anna, hastened towards Countess Sophy and begged her to come at once, as Count Radul was seeking her.

‘Now, Olga,’ said the lady, kissing the child as she left her, ‘do not trouble your little head any more. Remember that you have plenty of friends to take care of you and Eric. Go and play with him, dear, and make him happy, that is what your mother would wish you to do.’

Olga went towards a bench where Nania had now seated herself, and tried her best to play with Eric, but she felt so dull and miserable that she could not succeed as usual in making her little brother laugh, and, quite out of spirits, she said that she would go and pick him some flowers from her own garden and bring them back to him.

‘Won’t you call Lady Irene or Lady Xenia to go with you, Princess Olga?’ asked the nurse, ‘or shall I send Catherine? It is a long way to your garden in the wood, and I suppose that is where you mean to go.’

‘No, please don’t, Nania. I shall not meet any one in the wood path, and I had far rather be alone. I shall not be very long, and I shall be able to play with baby much better when I have had a walk by myself.’

The nurse hesitated. The wood in which Olga had made a little garden for herself lay, it is true, within the wall which surrounded the hill on which the castle stood, but it was the most distant part of the enclosed grounds, and through it flowed a small stream which ran in under an arch in the wall near one of the guard towers, and out again beneath a similar opening about a mile off.

Princess Anna had never given any special orders that Olga was not to go there alone, but generally a lady-in-waiting or one of the maids had gone with her, and Nania was very anxious that all her late mistress’s wishes should be carefully carried out.

However, she could not imagine that any

possible danger awaited Olga in the wood, and as the poor child would plainly be the better for an undisturbed walk, the nurse allowed her to go, only cautioning her to come straight home as soon as she had gathered her flowers.

Quietly enough at first Olga followed the broad gravelled paths, and flights of stone steps which descended from terrace to terrace, but when the neatly-kept gardens ended and the mossy woodland tracks began, her spirits rose, and she began to run down the hill as she was accustomed to do. As she drew near the sheltered glade in which she had chosen the spot for her garden she heard a sound of struggling, and angry voices. She stopped for a moment, and then crept quietly on, till through an opening in the trees she could see what was happening without herself being seen. To her surprise she saw Ivan, the head forester, who lived with some of his men in the guard-house near the entrance of the stream, holding by the arm a boy a little older than herself, whom he seemed about to strike with the stock of his musket.

‘Stop, Ivan, what are you doing? What has that boy done?’ cried the little girl. Both Ivan and the boy looked up and saw Olga, who had

issued from her hiding-place and was standing on the top of a bank just above them.

Though Ivan did not strike the boy he continued to hold his arm, and Olga had a good chance of looking at him. He was gaily and somewhat strangely dressed in a suit of dark green velvet with tight red silk sleeves, red stockings, and a red cap. His hair was dark, and his black eyes were very bright and sparkling. He was a pretty boy despite his somewhat mischievous expression.

‘I beg your pardon, Princess Olga,’ said Ivan, ‘but this young man deserves a thrashing if ever boy did. He has not only pulled up the flowers in your garden, but has pulled down your rockery, and he won’t tell me how he got here, where he and the likes of him have no business.’

‘Pulled down my rockery! Oh, boy, why ever did you do that?’ exclaimed Olga.

‘I did not know it was your rockery,’ answered the boy, looking rather ashamed. ‘I wanted to make a bridge over the stream, and those stones looked handy for it. If you will tell this old fellow to let me go, I’ll soon build up the rockery again.’

‘I’d better thrash him first, Princess Olga,

indeed I had,' entreated Ivan, with energy, 'it will teach him not to come here again—it's the only way with these young poachers.'

'I'm not a poacher,' cried the boy, indignantly, 'I'm—well, never mind—the young lady shall decide. Is this old man to thrash me or not? I'll stand still and let him do it if you say so, but he could not do it by himself, not he!'

'No, no,' said Olga hastily, 'let him go, Ivan, and I'll see that he builds up the rockery again all right.'

'But I must see him off the premises, my lady,' insisted Ivan. 'It will never do to leave him trespassing on the grounds of my lord, Prince Eric.'

'Well, come back in half an hour—we shall have done the rockery by that time,' said Olga.

Ivan still objected, but Olga was firm, and at last the old man moved discontentedly away, determining to return in a *very* short half hour, and not to be far off meantime.

Olga had very few child companions, and saw these rarely, so the bright eyes and gay appearance of the young trespasser had taken her fancy, and no sooner was Ivan out of sight than she said :

‘I think the bridge was rather a good idea. Suppose we build it instead of the rockery?’

‘All right—but what will old Thrashem say?’

‘Oh, well—you see it was my rockery. I don’t see what it matters to him.’

‘Nor I either ; let’s build the bridge by all means. We must make haste though, for I have to go back.’

‘Go back where? Where did you come from?’

The boy looked round cautiously to see that no one was listening and then said,

‘It is a secret—I cannot tell you exactly, but you have done me a good turn and you are a nice girl, so I will tell you something if you will promise not to tell any one else.’

Olga’s eyes filled with tears as she answered—
‘My father and mother are both dead, so I suppose I can promise now. If they had been alive I must have told them.’

‘I am very sorry they are dead,’ answered the boy, pausing as he arranged a stone near the bank. ‘Perhaps that is another reason for telling you what I was going to say. You have been a friend to me and I can be a friend to you if you need one. My father is travelling

back to his own country, and as he stopped for a night on his journey not far from here, I thought I would explore the neighbourhood. I got in under the arch—where the stream runs in you know.'

'However did you manage that?' said Olga, 'you did not swim, for you are not wet, and your velvet clothes are not spoilt. It is not possible in any other way!'

'Isn't it? Never mind; by the way I got in you could get out if necessary. Now I can give you a servant who would bring me a message at any time if you wanted to send for me.'

'Why do you think I should want to send for you?'

'If *you* don't think it likely it does not matter. I did hear folks say that trouble might be brewing up here. You have a little brother, have you not?'

'Yes, a dear little boy!' cried Olga. 'I should like you to see him!'

'Perhaps I shall some day,' continued the strange boy still busy with the stones. 'Is your brother the Prince of the country?'

'Yes, he is. How much you know about us!'

‘Perhaps I do and perhaps I don’t. Well, would you like my servant?’

Olga paused much perplexed—

‘You are a very puzzling boy,’ she answered at length. ‘I have promised not to tell something you were going to tell me and I really don’t know now what it is. Was it that you were travelling with your father, or that you got in under the arch, or what? If it is about the servant I could not have a fresh servant in the castle without telling any one and saying where I got him.’

‘You must not tell any one anything about me,’ returned the boy, ‘except just what old Thrashem knows—or will know—that he found me spoiling your garden and that I helped you build a bridge instead of a rockery because you wished it. As for the servant, if you would like to have him I will arrange that you shall keep him without any one except yourself knowing anything about him.’

Olga hesitated again. It was really a very perplexing position for a little girl not quite twelve years old. She did not in the least wish to deceive her guardians or to act against their desires, yet at the same time she felt bound to

do all she could to protect Eric, and she fancied that Count Vladimir was more dangerous than any of her friends suspected. If she had been a little older she would have thought the danger of accepting a stranger's help and a servant whom she had to hide, at least as great as that of trusting to such protection as she had already, but perhaps as it turned out it was fortunate that this did not strike her. She believed in the good will of her new companion and replied—

‘I should certainly like to have some one whom I could send to fetch help if I wanted it—only perhaps it might be naughty to keep a man hidden from everybody else.’

‘I assure you it would not be in the least naughty to keep the servant I mean. Anyhow, if you agree you shall see him to-morrow, and if you don't like him you shall send him away. Listen carefully to this, however. He can understand what you say though he cannot speak.’

‘Cannot speak?’ interrupted Olga astonished.

‘Not a word,’ replied the boy. ‘Come down here about this time, or as near it as you

can manage, to-morrow, and he will be waiting for you. He will hold my red cap in his hand and you will know him by that. You may give him any orders you like. Take the red cap and keep it carefully, and if ever you want my help give the servant the cap, or throw it to him if you cannot get near him. That's all ; now be quiet, here is Thrashem coming back.'

'It's not half an hour.

'No, I never supposed he would trust me so long. Here, give me a stone—pretend to be busy.'

'Whatever are you doing, Princess Olga?' grumbled Ivan as he came up. 'I never thought you would let that young scamp lead *you* into mischief. Why you will block up the whole stream, spoil the trout-fishing, make the water overflow the banks, and ruin the young plantations.'

'Oh, Ivan, don't be angry ! I thought a bridge such a capital idea.'

'Well—capital idea or not it can't be carried out now, for this young master is coming with me, and he will have to walk out of the wood pretty quick or he will make acquaintance with

a stick after all. Now come along you—what's-your-name.'

'Yes, what *is* your name?' asked Olga eagerly.

'Red Cap for the present. Good-bye,' laughed the boy, as Ivan marched him off.

'Good-bye, don't hurt him, Ivan,' cried Olga.

'Not if he behaves himself,' replied the forester.

Olga watched them out of sight, gathered a few flowers and slowly climbed up the hill. On reaching the castle she gave the account of her expedition which Red Cap had suggested, and Countess Sophy and the nurse, pleased that she had found something to amuse and interest her, did not blame her for letting a strange boy help her to build the bridge.

Had they known what else that boy had promised to do for her they would have been considerably alarmed, but of that they were fortunately ignorant.

All next morning Olga was in a fever of excitement. The events of the last week were however quite sufficient to account for her state of mind, and nobody suspected that she had any other cause for her restlessness, for being unable

to settle either to work or play, and for constantly wanting to know the time.

Early in the afternoon she told the nurse that she wanted to go back to her garden. 'Well,' said Nania, 'I suppose you will find no more strange boys there. I really wish you would take some one with you.'

'Ivan is sure to have kept a sharp look-out for boys,' answered the child. 'Don't be anxious, nurse. It is much nicer to go alone.'

Nania again consented, though somewhat reluctantly, and Olga made haste to escape before she should encounter Countess Sophy or any one else likely to ask questions.

Along the walks, down the steps, down the mossy path she ran, and with beating heart leapt over the last bank which overhung her garden. On the few remaining piled-up stones of her rockery, red cap in hand, was seated her new servant—a monkey !

CHAPTER V

ERIC NEEDS A FRIEND

OLGA stood still in blank amazement. Surely Red Cap had played her just such a mischievous trick as she might have expected. What possible good could a monkey do either her or Eric?

The monkey on seeing her approach started up from his seat and held out the cap with a low and very profound bow; then he stood in an attitude of attention as if awaiting her commands.

‘Are you my new servant?’ she asked at length in a tone of disappointment. The monkey bowed again, and again held out the cap which Olga took rather reluctantly.

‘What can you do?’ she said, not quite

knowing how to continue the conversation. The creature glanced round and noticed a small summer-house where Olga kept her gardening tools. He ran to it, fetched a watering-pot, filled it at the stream, and proceeded carefully to water such of the plants as were in the shade of the trees, avoiding those in the glare of the sun. He looked up at the little girl as if asking her approval, then, seeing that she had dropped her hood, he picked it up, and carefully replaced it on her head.

Olga smiled.

‘I see,’ she said, ‘you mean that you will work for me and wait upon me. That is it, isn’t it?’

The monkey nodded, and grinned to show his satisfaction.

‘What shall I call you? You must have a name, you know. Will Tommy do?’

The monkey shook his head, ran back to the garden, and picked a leaf of mustard which he held up to her.

‘What—Mustard? What a funny name! Is that what you want me to call you?’

The ape nodded two or three times.

‘Very well, I don’t mind. I don’t think it is

a very pretty name, but if *you* like it that is most important. Now then, Mustard, where shall you sleep, and what shall you eat ?'

Without a moment's hesitation Mustard sprang up into an immense oak tree and curled himself up into one of the big branches so that he was completely hidden by the thick leafy screen. Then stretching himself he jumped thence into a chestnut tree, picked one or two nuts, broke off the outer rind, cracked the shell and ate the kernel with an air of the utmost content. Olga clapped her hands and laughed for the first time since her mother's death.

'Oh, you dear Mustard ! you are a nice monkey and I like you very much.'

Mustard acknowledged the compliment by springing with one bound to her feet.

'I do wish Eric could see you,' she continued, 'it would make him crow, and I dare say he would soon learn to say Mustard. Couldn't we manage it ?''

Mustard shook his head again very solemnly and held up one hand in a warning manner.

'Oh, very well,' said Olga regretfully. 'Perhaps some day everything will be safe, and then you can see him. Now I must go. I

will come back here to-morrow alone, if nurse will let me ; if she won't, and you see anybody coming with me, you must hide, you understand ?'

Mustard made a low bow and pointed to the large tree as much as to say that his hiding-place was always ready ; and bidding him good-bye Olga ran up the hill much more merrily than she had done the day before.

As she reached the highest terrace she met Irene coming to look for her.

'Where have you been, Olga ?' cried the young lady, 'Countess Sophy is looking for you.'

'I have been in my garden. Is anything the matter ?'

'Why, yes—the Hospodar has to return at once to Dorzyn.'

'At once ! You don't mean this afternoon ? He was to stay here as long as Cousin Vladimir. Is he going too ?'

'No, worse luck !' replied Irene. 'The Count is not going, but my Lord Jagellon is. A messenger arrived post haste about an hour ago and brought news of some disturbance at home—enemies trying to stir up a rising in

Dorzyn I believe, and the Hospodar is obliged to set off post haste to quiet his own people.'

Irene stopped here, but the brown-eyed Xenia, who came up in time to hear her last words, was more communicative.

'Yes, and most of us can make a pretty good guess as to how those disturbances arose. Count Vladimir's lordship of Gravenia is not so far away from Dorzyn. It is easy enough to send a few banditti over the border and to stir up strife, if you want to bring the Master home again when he is in a place where he interferes with your wicked plots.'

'Hush, Xenia ! You know Countess Macovros said you should not talk when you cannot be certain that what you say is true ; you only put ideas into the child's head.'

'Well, all you cautious people may lose that blessed baby with your prudence. That's all I can say. Anyhow, Olga must make haste, for Countess Sophy wants her to say good-bye to the Hospodar, and he will be off in half an hour. She will hardly have time to change her frock.'

'Never mind my frock. Where is the Hospodar?' exclaimed Olga in great excitement.

‘In the arcade,’ answered Xenia ; ‘but you had better come to Countess Sophy first. She is going out to say good-bye to him directly. Count Radul will take him the stirrup-cup, and you and Eric are to be there.’

‘No, I must see him at once,’ cried Olga, setting off to run to the house.

Irene wished to detain her, but Xenia held her friend back.

‘Let the child go. When Count and Countess Macovros come out to speed the Hospodar, Count Vladimir will be there also. Give Olga a chance of seeing him alone, she can do no harm, and may do some good.’

Olga meantime reached the arcade, which surrounded the large courtyard, and found the Hospodar Jagellon, as Xenia had said, standing there with two or three squires to whom he was giving final directions. One of the other nobles who had remained at the castle was with him, Vladimir and Radul were still inside the house.

‘Oh, my lord,’ cried the little girl, as she ran up to him nearly crying, ‘don’t go, please don’t go!’

‘What is the matter, Princess Olga?’ asked the Hospodar kindly and with some anxiety.

‘Come in here and tell me all about it.’ He made a sign of excuse to his friend and led the child into one of the rooms which opened on to the arcade. ‘Now what is it, my dear? Why do you want me not to go?’

Olga coloured deeply. She dared not say how much she distrusted her cousin, and murmured,

‘You were my father’s friend. I know little Eric is safe as long as you are here.’

‘My dear child, your little brother is surrounded with trusty friends and vassals, and will be perfectly safe when I am gone.’

‘Countess Sophy said,’ added Olga more boldly but still embarrassed, ‘that you had promised to stay as long—as long—as any one else.’

‘I meant, it is true,’ replied Jagellon also somewhat perplexed, ‘to have left the castle on the same day as your cousin and my friend the Lord of Wurbat. A messenger however has just arrived with bad news which obliges me to start at once. Your cousin Vladimir and my lord of Wurbat leave in two days, and Count and Countess Macovros will easily entertain them for that short time. Really, my little

lady, you will have nothing to fear and no cause to trouble yourself either about the guest who goes or the guests who stay behind.'

He did not know what caused the child's anxiety, and though he himself distrusted Vladimir he did not imagine that the Count had any immediate intention of injuring Eric. He rather thought, as did some of the other nobles, that what he intended to do in the end was to deprive them one by one of their share in the guardianship of the little Prince and to make himself sole Regent. This they were fully determined to prevent.

Jagellon stroked the little girl's hair and tried to cheer her, but Olga became desperate.

'No,' she said, 'it is not about entertaining them. It is that I know Count Vladimir hates Eric and wants to get rid of him that he may be Prince himself. Mama told me to take care of Eric, and so I will, but I am too little to fight my cousin, so I don't want you to go while he is here.'

'But, my dear child,' answered Jagellon, now really uneasy, 'even if your ideas were true, which I do not think they are, Count Radul is quite able to protect the little Prince, and

he and all his men-at-arms are devoted to him.'

Olga felt rather ashamed of appearing to mistrust so good and true a friend as Count Radul ; at the same time, though she was too young either to understand her own fears or to explain them, she felt that once inside the castle, Count Vladimir was almost as powerful as her brother's proper guardian, and a great deal more cunning and unscrupulous. However, words failed her, and she remained silent, while the Hospodar went on :

'Be sure, Princess Olga, if you need help, which I hope and believe you will not, you have only to send for me, and I will come at once and defend you and your brother to the very utmost of my power.'

The words of Jagellon recalled to the child's mind those of Red Cap. He too had promised help if she should send to him—he had told her how to send. How should she send for the Hospodar if she needed him ? Mustard might be a messenger if he could find the way. He was so clever that perhaps he knew where Dorzyn lay, but if he got there he would be unable to speak. These thoughts flashed

quickly through her mind, and then she said—

‘Perhaps I could not write to you. I might not be able to get paper. Will you give me something, or tell me of something which I could send as a token?’

The Hospodar smiled and drew a ring off his finger.

‘You are a very determined little lady, and very thoughtful for your age. Here is a ring which your father gave me. Keep it till we meet again, and meantime, if you want me, send it to me.’

‘Thank you very much; here they come. Please don’t say I asked you,’ said Olga greatly confused; and hiding the ring in her dress she hastened to join Countess Sophy Macovros who at that minute came out of the castle accompanied by Nania carrying Eric, and followed by Count Radul and Count Vladimir.

All the usual ceremonies of farewell were carried out, warm good wishes were interchanged between Count Vladimir, Count Radul, and the Hospodar of Dorzyn. Jagellon, before he went, once more kissed the hand of the baby Eric, and swore to be faithful to him and to

defend him against every foe ; then turning to Olga he added : ‘ And you, Princess Olga, shall always find me a true knight ready to come at your call.’ So saying he leapt into his saddle, and having received the stirrup-cup from the hands of Radul, he bowed low to all present and clattered away followed by his gallant train.

‘ So, cousin Olga, you have enlisted a champion in your service ? ’ said Count Vladimir in a sneering tone as he watched the Hospodar’s departure with an air of grim satisfaction.

‘ I like the Hospodar very much, cousin Vladimir,’ replied Olga timidly, ‘ but I don’t exactly know that he is my champion.’

‘ You don’t want one, my dear, so long as I am here,’ was the answer. ‘ Well, Prince Eric, and what have you to say to your kinsman ? ’

The constant efforts of Count and Countess Macovros, united to those of the nurse, had taught Eric that Vladimir was a person to be treated with respect, and he held out his hand with much dignity, though without the merry smile with which the little Prince was accustomed to greet his favourites.

‘ So we are becoming better acquainted, are

we? You had better take him indoors, nurse; evening is drawing in.'

'It is quite warm as yet, my lord,' returned Nania, somewhat offended by what she regarded as an interference with her department.

Countess Sophy, however, made her a hasty sign to retire, and she carried the Prince into the castle, accompanied by Olga, who was beginning to feel tired after all the events and excitements of the afternoon. The Countess soon followed their example, and Count Vladimir, Count Macovros, and the Lord of Wurbat were left standing in the courtyard.

'I think, Count,' said Wurbat, 'that you propose returning to Gravenia the day after to-morrow?'

'Probably, my lord,' answered Vladimir. 'I am only waiting to see that my little cousin is comfortably settled in all respects, and then I shall leave him in the hands of our good Radul here, and return to look after my own affairs.'

'Then we can ride together for the first two stages?'

'Certainly, my lord. Shall we arrange to have our trains ready at daybreak?'

‘That will suit me exactly. I think of going for a stroll this fine evening ; will you accompany me?’

‘If your lordship will excuse me, I have some letters to write, as a messenger has just ridden in post from Gravenia.’

‘Then I will not interrupt you. Count Macovros, will you come with me?’

Count Radul readily agreed, and he and the Lord of Wurbat walked away together.

Vladimir waited till they were out of sight, and then shouted impatiently, ‘Nicholas!’

The squire appeared immediately from some dim recess of the arcade, and asked, ‘What is your lordship’s pleasure?’

‘So far so good. We have got rid of this old fool of a Hospodar, with his ancestral friendship and all the rest of it. I suppose there is enough work awaiting him in Dorzyn to occupy him for at least a fortnight?’

‘Quite, my lord. Companies of raiders from Gravenia have entered his territory in six or seven different places. Your lordship’s dominions will benefit greatly by their departure—almost as much as you will benefit by the departure of the Hospodar from Lorlonia. On

all accounts it is better that he should be at home and looking after his own subjects.'

'Good. Now are our bands ready in the neighbourhood of the south-western guard house?'

'There are five bands of fifty men each, my lord, two hundred and fifty in all, hidden among the low hills and the woods just outside the gateway. You have only to persuade the Lord of Wurbat and his men to ride on a little in advance of your own followers. Make some excuse for their lingering behind, and see that the drawbridge is kept down and the portcullis raised in readiness for their departure. When they reach the gateway they must engage the attention of the guard, and the first fifty will be on the bridge and secure the passage before the defenders realise what has happened. This once achieved nothing can prevent the entrance of the other four bands. It would be well to get Wurbat and his men out of sight before any skirmish begins, as the longer we can prevent news from spreading in the neighbourhood, the more time will Sir Witold have to play his part, and the firmer will be your lordship's hold on the castle and lands of Lorlonia.'

CHAPTER VI

THE PLOT SUCCEEDS

THE portcullis was raised and the drawbridge lowered as the Lord of Wurbat and his ten followers rode out of the south-western gateway of Lorlonia.

Count Vladimir rode with them, accompanied by Nicholas and two men-at-arms. As he crossed the drawbridge he shouted to the warders,

‘Do not raise the bridge or drop the gate for a few minutes. The rest of my band are following. They were delayed by an accident to the baggage mules ; but my Lord of Wurbat and I wanted to push on, and the others will be here immediately.’

‘Very good, my Lord Count,’ replied the head warder and as the last man-at-arms

crossed the bridge, he added aside to his companions, 'We shall be glad enough to see the last of that rascally crew. Let them make good speed back to Gravenia—Lorlonia wants none of them.'

'True enough,' answered one of the men, 'they are boasting braggarts, always ready to quarrel, and as for that Nicholas with his hang-dog face, if he does not mean mischief to our young Prince, I'll roast my pike and eat it.'

'Better keep it cool to thrust into the squire's body methinks,' retorted another; and they continued their comments on Vladimir's band for some minutes, looking meanwhile alternately towards the castle to see if the laggards were coming, and towards the retreating forms of the advance guard who were presently out of sight.

'Come,' said the head warder, 'if those fellows don't make haste, I shall have this bridge up again. These are not days in which to risk anything.'

'Here they are,' cried a soldier; and sure enough, the remainder of the troop came trotting along the path at the foot of the western garden.

'Make haste,' shouted the head warder, and

all the others turned to look at them, thus failing to observe that armed men were approaching slowly on either hand, keeping close to the outside of the wall.

The foremost of the band from within just reached the gate, when a dozen of the assailants from without sprang forward and took possession of the bridge.

The head warder instantly gave orders to lower the portcullis, and at the same time wound his horn as a signal to the guards at the other towers. It was too late. Vladimir's men within the gateway had seized the warders who attempted to obey the orders given, and though these struggled gallantly and nearly succeeded in freeing themselves, the delay gave time for the attacking party to swarm across the bridge, and their numbers, which were increased every minute by fresh arrivals, soon overpowered the scanty guard, and enabled the first comers to keep the entrance open till the whole two hundred and fifty traitors who had been concealed in the neighbourhood were inside the wall.

The other garrisons who had started on hearing the signal, which was passed from tower

to tower, arrived separately, some half-dozen men at a time, and were easily overcome by their numerous and successful foes. Two or three ran up to the castle, and caused the great bell to be rung; Count Radul was soon on the spot, only to be made prisoner like the rest. One, more prudent than his fellows, perceived what was happening, and instead of running straight into the trap, set off at the top of his speed to warn the inhabitants of the nearest village, and thus to raise the country against the treachery which threatened their prince.

Alas, his forethought was as vain as the rash courage of his fellows! He speedily encountered Vladimir, Nicholas, and their two attendants, who had contrived at the first halt to excuse themselves to their companions by saying that they must wait to see the rest of their train come up, and would then ride on and overtake the Lord of Wurbat. Instead of doing so they departed post haste for Lorlonia and soon met the solitary fugitive. He refused to tell his errand, but they recognised his livery, arrested him on suspicion, put him on a horse behind one of the men-at-arms, and rode still more rapidly back to the scene of action.

Meantime the women and children at the Palace had been thrown into a state of terror. They had seen Vladimir depart with a feeling of great relief, and Olga had run with Irene and Xenia to her old post of observation at the end of the highest terrace to watch the troupe as they reached the bottom of the hill and turned into the broad road below.

‘Don’t they look pretty, Irene?’ cried the little girl. ‘The spears shine so brightly and the plumes dance up and down in the sunlight.’

‘They do indeed,’ replied the young lady. ‘See, there is the Lord of Wurbat, and Count Vladimir rides at his right hand.’

‘That is the prettiest and the pleasantest sight which I have seen for many a long day,’ added Xenia. ‘Good-bye, my lord, and peace be with you ; you leave more peace behind you than we could ever enjoy while you were here !’

‘Do take care, Xenia,’ said the more cautious Irene, ‘you never know who may hear you.’

‘Count Vladimir cannot hear me, nor Nicholas either, they are much too far off, thank goodness !’

‘Yes, but all their people have not gone yet. Something went wrong with the baggage mules,



"OLGA HAD RUN
WITH IRENE AND
XENI TO HER OLD
POST OF OBSERVA-
TION."

and the men who escort them will pass in a few minutes.'

'Will they?' said Olga; 'then let us stay here a little longer. I like to see men and horses winding through the trees.'

Her companions agreed; and while they waited began to talk of their future plans. Irene was to return to her mother in a few weeks; Xenia, on the other hand, was an orphan, and her uncle, who was also her guardian, had agreed to leave her for the present to act as friend and governess to Olga under the superintendence of Countess Sophy.

'I am so glad that you will stay, Xenia,' said the little girl, after they had discussed the matter for a few minutes, 'but we shall miss Irene, shall we not?'

'Yes, dear, and I shall be sorry to go, though very glad to see my mother again.'

The conversation went on in this manner till a fresh clatter of hoofs and sound of voices announced the passing of the baggage train.

'They have all passed now,' said Xenia, 'so we may as well go and gather flowers.'

The three girls were moving slowly along the terrace, when they were startled by the

sudden sound of a horn, followed by a loud and confused noise of voices, and the clashing of pikes, together with the occasional firing of a musket, or arquebus.

‘What is that? Irene, Xenia, what can that be?’ cried poor little Olga, whose fears returned twofold after the late relief of her cousin’s departure.

‘Some enemy must have attacked the gate-house, let us run and warn Count Radul,’ replied Irene; and all three ran as fast as they could to the castle. Count Radul seized his sword and was on his way to the scene of action before the messengers from the other towers had time to reach the castle, but, as already said, he was quickly overpowered by numbers.

Countess Sophy’s first thought was for Eric, and she bade Nania prepare a few clothes for him and Olga in case flight were necessary and possible. All the men from the guard-house adjoining the castle had followed Count Radul, so none remained to act as immediate protectors except the seneschal, a few old men like himself, and the pages who, though anxious to join in the fray, had been sternly ordered back by the

Master of the Household. Olga thought of Mustard and had some vague idea of running to look for him, but Countess Sophy bade her remain in the house, and she herself was unwilling to leave her brother until she knew what had really taken place.

The frightened household were not long left in suspense.

A warlike procession was soon seen winding up the northern approach. First appeared two hundred of Vladimir's soldiers four abreast, holding their pikes erect and marching with an air of triumph. Then rode a single horseman, proudly displaying the Vulture banner of Gravenia. Behind him walked the men-at-arms from the various guard-houses, deprived of their weapons and with their hands tied behind their backs. Then came four of Vladimir's squires, and in their midst, a prisoner and without his sword, though not bound, Countess Sophy was horrified to see her husband.

Last of all rode the triumphant Vladimir with a few of his special attendants. He had left the remainder of his force to garrison the guard towers.

'Shut the gates!' cried the seneschal when

the first soldiers came in sight ; and the pages, who were waiting in the courtyard, hastened to obey his order, and swung to the heavy bronze gates which generally stood open all day.

The seneschal locked them and with a low bow handed the keys to Countess Sophy, who, speechless with anxiety, was standing in the arcade, and saw only too clearly that all possibility of defence was over.

By this time the soldiers had ranged themselves in a double rank round the broad gravelled terrace in front of the gates, and Vladimir riding into the centre ordered them to bring forward the prisoners. All told these were about sixty men, besides Count Radul and two or three squires who attended him.

‘Count Radul,’ said Vladimir in a haughty tone, ‘what do you mean by resisting with an armed force the cousin of your Prince, his guardian and rightful heir?’

‘Count Vladimir,’ replied Radul, ‘when my master’s kinsman has asked for peaceable entrance into these walls I have at no time failed to render him due honour. When I arrived to-day at the south-western gateway I found him with all these alien soldiers fighting and

wounding the faithful servants of my Prince. How could I do otherwise than oppose him ?’

‘Stand forth, Andrew,’ said Vladimir, addressing the leader of the first fifty men who had violently seized the bridge. ‘Give an account of what passed at a gateway.’

‘So please your noble lordship,’ began Andrew, who had been carefully taught by Nicholas, ‘my men and I were waiting to greet our mates who had been stopping here in the castle——’ he hesitated, and Nicholas prompted him—

‘You came up to the bridge from outside, anxious to meet them as they came out, eh ?’

‘Yes—we called out to them.’

‘You did nothing of the sort,’ broke in the head warder, unable to contain himself. ‘So please you, my lord, they jumped on to the bridge, and seized our men——’

‘Silence, fellow !’ shouted Vladimir in a voice of thunder. ‘If I rightly understand you, Andrew, you wanted to give a friendly and peaceable welcome to your companions, and these warders attacked you and tried to prevent your coming together ?’

‘Yes, my lord Count, that is it.’

‘And you, Count Radul,’ continued the self-

made judge, turning again to his prisoner, 'having arrived in the midst of the disturbance, instead of quieting your men and inquiring into the cause of their drawn swords and uncalled for wrath, joined in the attack on my people. Had not they had other friends in the neighbourhood who were quietly waiting to act as my escort on my way home, I know not how my poor fellows might have suffered. This is, however, a fortunate event. I have long suspected, and I now have full proof, that you are a traitor to the princely house of Lorlonia. You desire to prevent all my little cousin's kinsmen from visiting him and his castle, and to keep him a hostage in your own hands. Your wicked plots shall, however, be frustrated. Men of Lorlonia,' he continued, raising his voice and speaking to the disarmed soldiers, 'as one of the Council of Regency and next heir to the Principality, I hereby depose Count Radul from the guardianship of Prince Eric, and I will assume the charge of the children of Lorlonia and this castle until I can communicate with the rest of the council. I do this at great cost to myself, as I have urgent business in Gravenia, but my duty to my cousin demands this sacrifice.

‘I now desire that you at once swear obedience to me as guardian and Regent. If you do this you shall be free ; if not, you remain prisoners.’

A low murmuring arose amongst the men who were thus addressed. They were all perfectly faithful to Eric, but some of the younger ones did not fully understand the dispute between his guardians. They were aware that Vladimir was the children’s nearest relation, and had not the same reasons for suspecting him as those who knew him better.

Ivan the forester, however, who had taken his share in the fray, was equal to the occasion. ‘I beg your lordship’s pardon, my lord Count,’ said he, ‘but your lordship has forgotten that you are not the next heir to Prince Eric. Ladies have governed Lorlonia ere now. I trust our little Prince will live, reign, marry, and have children. If not Princess Olga will be Princess of Lorlonia.’

Vladimir frowned darkly and would have made an angry reply had not Nicholas bent from his saddle and whispered to him. Restraining himself with difficulty he answered, ‘This is beside the question. For the time being neither Prince Eric nor Princess Olga is old enough to

govern. I am guardian and Regent. Will you or will you not swear obedience to me? Go round, Nicholas, and ask them one by one. Set those who promise free, the others shall be presently marched off to prison. We have no time to dally with scruples.'

About half the men questioned swore and were set at liberty, though their arms were not restored to them. Ivan, the head warders of all the towers, and their principal followers, refused, and remained bound.

'Now for you, Count Radul. If I have your oath you shall be a prisoner here on parole. If not, there are dungeons at Gravenia, and one is ready for your occupation.'

'My oath will never be given to any but my lawful Prince,' was the quiet reply.

'I knew your obstinacy and did not much expect it,' was the contemptuous answer. 'As I remarked before I have no time to waste, and I have not the slightest inclination to argue. Your lordship will start on your journey at daybreak to-morrow. One little point, however, remains to be settled. It concerns my friend Countess Macovros. I observe that that excellent lady is holding the keys of the gates in her

hand, and is watching our proceedings with evident interest. Now she probably awaits your orders as to her course of action. If she will have those gates opened quietly, and will behave with her usual discretion and amiability, I shall have no objection to her remaining for the present in charge of my little cousins. I have no lady ready to undertake the care of the children, and am not prepared to act as head nurse myself. If she should unhappily feel disposed to refuse my very simple requests I shall be under the painful necessity of having the gates broken open and of depriving the nursery of its worthy superintendent. There is no difficulty whatever in the matter, but it will spoil some good bronze work, and perhaps frighten the children. Will your lordship oblige me by a speedy decision? It is near dinner-time and we are all hungry.'

Count Radul hesitated. The surrender was most painful, yet he knew that resistance would be absolutely useless, and as far as he could see the only hope for the poor children lay in their retaining the services of his wife. Without directly answering the heartless speech of his captor he therefore turned to the Countess and said—

‘It is hopeless to resist, Sophy. Let the gates be opened, and do you remain and be faithful to your Prince and his sister.’

Olga and the women, who had awaited the end of the discussion in silent agony, now began to sob.

The Countess did not shed a tear. She held out the keys to the seneschal and said, ‘Open the gates.’

‘No, madam,’ replied the old man, ‘at least spare me this. Do not force me to end my faithful service by opening the gates of Lorlonia to the enemy of my master’s house.’

Countess Sophy Macovros made no reply. She came forward to the gates and called ‘Nicholas.’

The squire sprang from his horse and advanced towards her. She passed the keys to him through the bronze bars, saying, ‘*You* need not fear to be a traitor.’

Nicholas bowed, turned the lock from the outside, threw open the gates, and welcomed his master as Lord of the Castle of Lorlonia.

CHAPTER VII

PRISONERS

THE next morning dawned with little hope for the captives.

Count Radul had been allowed to take a short farewell of his wife on the evening before, and was led away before sunrise. Soon afterwards Vladimir sent for Nicholas and had a long conversation with him on past events and future plans. Sir Witold, who had married Vladimir's sister and was no better than himself, was the only chief holding lands in the Principality on whom he could fully depend. He had been promised a rich reward if he could successfully help to make his brother-in-law Prince, and was now employed in trying to win nobles and knights over to his side by lies and promises.

At present, of course, Witold only suggested that Vladimir should be made guardian instead of Radul, whom he declared to be a traitor. If once Vladimir had the children thoroughly in his power he fancied the rest would be easy. As for the King he was away, fighting against another sovereign with whom he was at war ; and since Princess Anna was dead it was unlikely that any one would call upon him to interfere—at all events for some time to come.

‘The chief thing, my lord,’ said Nicholas when all these matters had been talked over, ‘is to prevent the news of yesterday’s events from spreading too quickly. If none of the other nobles interfere for a few weeks we shall be able to get your own men into all the garrisons and principal posts in the country. Once settled here, here you stay ; it will not be over easy to attack you, and impossible to turn you out. The men who refused to swear fealty to you are safe under lock and key. Even those who swore and were freed are forbidden to go without the wall for the present. They are all at work under supervision. It only remains to deal with the women and children.

I am not sure whether it was wise to keep Countess Sophy.'

'Why yes, if any of the Council of Regency hear that she is in the castle looking after the children they will take it for granted that the brats are properly treated. I need not keep her longer than I choose. My sister can take her place by and by.'

'How about the ladies Irene and Xenia?'

'Keep them too for the present. If they suffered any ill-treatment we should have their kinsmen down upon us, and if we send them away they will spread the news too rapidly.'

'It is well, my lord. And the reward which your lordship promised me?'

'What reward?'

'Knighthood, and the lands of Tortosima.'

'Knighthood you shall have in all due form. As for the lands of Tortosima I am not sure whether they are at my disposal.'

'Why, my lord Count, the Lord of Tortosima died a month ago. It is a fief of Lornonia, Prince Eric bears the title of Hospodar, and the lands and their revenues are always held by a chosen vassal of the reigning Prince. The fief has not yet been given away as I know

well, and as Regent your lordship cannot question that it will be at your disposal.'

'Good, we shall see shortly. Do not doubt, Nicholas, that your interests are as dear to me as my own. For the present leave me. I have affairs which demand attention.'

Nicholas walked away in a discontented manner, and Vladimir, after a few minutes, went out into the western garden and began to pace up and down the uppermost terrace, with his hands behind his back, in deep thought.

Presently raising his head he caught sight of Olga, who had just come out of the castle and was crossing the far end of the path.

'Come here, child ;—where are you going ?' he added as she drew near.

'I am going to my garden, Cousin Vladimir.'

'Where is your garden ?'

'Down in the wood yonder,' she answered timidly, pointing in that direction.

'Why are you alone? Where is your nurse? or Lady Xenia, or one of them? What is the good of my keeping all these women if they neglect their duty in this way?'

'Don't be angry, Cousin Vladimir, please don't,' said the child, her eyes filling with tears ;

‘they never neglect me, and any of them would come with me at any time, only I like best to go alone to my garden. Nurse is with Eric just now, but Xenia and Irene are sitting under the arcade. I will fetch one of them to go with me if you like.’

‘Go and fetch Countess Macovros and come back with her directly,’ replied her cousin, so sternly that Olga went off in terror without another word.

Countess Sophy hastened to the terrace holding the little girl by the hand, and without giving her time to speak the Count addressed her.

‘Countess Sophy Macovros, when I kindly consented that you should remain here, despite your husband’s treachery, it was on the understanding that you should look after my wards, the children of my late cousin the Prince of Lorlonia. You appear to neglect this duty shamefully. I find this child, Princess Olga, wandering about alone without any attendance whatsoever. I believe that you have two idle young ladies in the house who waited on the late Princess Anna. What are they doing? Where are the nurses? I dare say they have left

the baby to look after himself, with the design that I should be blamed if anything should happen to the Prince.'

'I may at once reassure your lordship on that point,' replied the Countess, who, though she had flushed scarlet at the insult to her husband, resolved to restrain herself for the sake of the children. 'I have just left Prince Eric with two nurses attending him. I regret that you should be displeased at finding Princess Olga alone in the garden. She is accustomed to amuse herself in this way, but since you have assumed the temporary guardianship of the children of Lorlonia your instructions respecting them shall be carried out whenever and wherever possible. I understand that you desire that Princess Olga shall always have a companion in her walks and games. It shall be so in future.'

'Understand me, madam,' returned the Count more angrily than before, 'whether my guardianship is temporary or not is no concern of yours. My instructions have no limitations, and it will not rest with you to judge when and where they are possible. Not only is Princess Olga to have a constant companion in her walks and games, but neither she nor Prince Eric is

to go beyond the three upper terraces and the two walled gardens on any pretext whatsoever.'

Olga heard him with dismay. The three upper terraces were in full sight of the windows of the castle, and the two gardens which were commonly called 'walled,' were small enclosures adjoining the laundry ground, planted with vegetables and fruit-trees for the use of the household, and surrounded with very high walls. Neither on the terraces nor in these gardens would it be possible for her to escape from observation even for a few minutes, so she would have no chance of meeting Mustard even if she could coax Xenia to leave her for a short time, or find some pretext to rid herself of any other companion who might be ordered to attend her.

Countess Macovros paused before answering and then said, 'You are master of course, my lord, yet I would beg you to reconsider your orders—at least, as far as Olga is concerned. Prince Eric may perhaps take the air sufficiently within the limits you have laid down, but an active child like his sister, who is accustomed to play and run about, and to ride her pony in the surrounding woods and meadows, is sure to

suffer in health from such confinement. In her case, therefore, I would venture to ask for some extension of the boundaries.'

'I am master, and I do not discuss the matter. You may go, Countess Macovros.'

Vladimir waved his hand with an air of authority, and Countess Sophy and Olga sorrowfully retreated.

The ladies and nurses were, needless to say, highly indignant on hearing of the Count's tyrannical orders. Poor Countess Macovros, who was grieving bitterly over her husband's fate, was weighed down with anxiety at this fresh proof of Vladimir's intention to keep the children State prisoners.

Xenia being prevented by the prudence of her companions from giving full vent to her wrath, went off to find the seneschal, who was very fond of her and hated his new master at least as much as she did. She found him sitting in a melancholy attitude in the small room opening on to the arcade, which was generally considered as his own.

'Ah well,' he said, when he had heard the story, 'may my day come soon or I may see my young Prince go before me! This is the

beginning of the end. I am an old man, and would gladly give my life for his, only it is not my life which the vulture desires, he would destroy the young eagle !’

‘What do you mean, Marco?’ cried Olga, her cheeks white and her eyes expanded with fear. She had come to look for Xenia, and unseen by either her or the seneschal had overheard his last words.

‘Nothing dear, nothing,’ exclaimed Xenia trying to soothe her, but Marco was too much in earnest to allow his warnings to be disregarded.

‘No, Princess Olga,’ he continued ; ‘I would not terrify you needlessly, but the time for smooth sayings is past. Count Vladimir will not be satisfied till he is Prince, and he cannot be Prince while the rightful heir lives. Lorraine will not have him ; the people love your father’s house too well. Though he may try to reign without bloodshed, the day will come, and come soon, when he will have gone too far to retreat, and will sweep all who stand in his way from his path if he has them in his power. I am an old man, and the aged see true. Take my word for it. Do you and your brother escape if you can.’

‘Come away, Olga,’ said Xenia, who was beginning to be alarmed lest Vladimir or one of his henchmen should find them talking with a servant whom he knew to be unfriendly, though he had not as yet wished further to rouse the wrath of the household by putting him under arrest.

The child lifted Marco’s hand, and said—

‘Thank you, Marco.’ Then as she walked away with Xenia she said, ‘Oh, Xenia, I suppose it is wicked, but I do wish Cousin Vladimir were dead!’

‘Perhaps it is wicked, my dear, I am sure it is not surprising,’ replied the young lady. ‘However, I advise you not to express such wishes out loud; and don’t be too much frightened by what old Marco says, old men get very nervous you know.’

The next day went slowly by. Vladimir’s orders were strictly carried out, and very dull did Olga find it to pace slowly up and down the terraces and walled gardens. Though she was fond of her companions it seemed impossible to play with them when she felt all the time as if she were watched by the eyes of her jailers. Moreover, Marco’s words haunted her,

she remembered how she had promised her mother to take care of Eric, she thought that she ought to send either the red cap or the Hospodar's ring to summon help, yet knew not how to do so.

All these ideas wearied her poor little brain, and kept her wakeful; when, on the third night after the taking of the castle, she went to bed in her little room, next to that in which slept Eric and Nania. Presently she thought she heard something strike the window, she listened, the sound was repeated. She jumped out of bed, ran to the window, opened the shutter, and to her joy saw Mustard standing in the garden below !

At that very moment she heard a sentry approaching ; Mustard, however, who heard it even more quickly than she did, sprang into a tree and hid till the danger was past. When all was silent he returned, and after bowing to her, touched his head with his hand as if putting on a cap, then made a movement as if throwing something, and then again looked up at her with an air of anxious expectation. Olga quickly understood what he meant ; she fetched the cap, opened the window, and threw

it out to him. Then leaning forward she said in a low clear voice—

‘Good Mustard, my cousin forbids me to walk beyond the three top terraces and the two walled gardens, so I could not come to see you before. I will look out of this window every night when Nania is asleep. Perhaps you may bring me some help.’

Mustard nodded quickly two or three times and then bounded away, while Olga made haste to shut both window and shutters before the sentry should return on his rounds.

A week dragged wearily past and then a fresh trouble overtook the poor captives.

Countess Sophy Macovros becoming more and more alarmed as to the designs of Vladimir, consulted with Irene and Xenia without saying anything of her fears to Olga.

Irene said that if the Countess would write a letter she was sure that her father, on hearing of the condition of things in the castle, would inform some of the Council of Regency and attempt to secure their freedom. Irene herself had written, but posts in those days were few and uncertain, and she had found no opportunity of forwarding her letter.

‘I should have no better chance of sending a letter than you,’ said the Countess mournfully.

‘Don’t be so down-hearted,’ put in Xenia, ‘do you write the letter, Countess Sophy; your words will carry most weight, and I will find means to send it.’

The letter was written accordingly, and Xenia entrusted it to George, the page, a great friend of hers, who declared that he knew a way of getting over the outer wall unseen by the watch, and would deliver it to a messenger outside, who would take it to its destination.

The plan almost succeeded—almost, but not quite. George got over the wall and met his friend the messenger. Unfortunately, just as he was leaving him, having entrusted him with the letter, one of Vladimir’s squires, who had been out shooting squirrels, came up unexpectedly, asked George what he was doing there, searched the messenger, an unarmed country boy who did not dare to resist, and found the letter. He dragged both boys to the nearest gatehouse, which was not far off, had the country boy soundly thrashed and dismissed, took George up to the castle for further punishment, and handed the letter to Vladimir.

The Count was furious, instantly placed all three ladies in close confinement, and separated them entirely from the children, who, he said, should now be accompanied in their walks not only by the nurses but by an armed sentry, with orders never to let them out of his sight.

As for George, he had a thrashing, followed by a month's imprisonment, and no further chance of speaking to Xenia.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLIGHT

OLGA and Eric were sorrowfully returning from their evening walk, after being deprived of their best friends, when yet another misfortune befel them.

Nania was about to take them up stairs, followed by the under-nurse, Catherine, when Vladimir met and stopped them. 'I have decided,' he said abruptly, 'that no one who has been under the influence of Count and Countess Macovros, those enemies of the House of Lorlonia, shall remain to poison the minds of these children. You nurses, therefore, will at once resign your charge. You will be paid and provided for. I shall send you both to Gravenia. Now you may say good-bye to Princess Olga and Prince Eric in my

presence. You will never see either of them again.'

It is needless to dwell on the grief and tears of nurses and children. Vladimir would listen to no entreaties. He said that all the clothes and possessions of the nurses had been already packed and brought down stairs, and bade Olga carry up Eric. He, poor child, began to understand that his friends were being taken from him one by one, and clung to Nania as if nothing would induce him to leave her, and Olga absolutely refused to try and take him from her.

The Count then seized the little boy himself, despite all his struggles, and roughly carried him up stairs. Olga gave Nania one parting hug and rushed after her little brother, who was handed over by Vladimir to his new nurse, a rather stupid-looking woman, who had been servant to Sir Witold's wife. The Count went away after repeating his orders that the children were never to be left alone, and particularly desiring that the nurse should keep the door between her room and Olga's open at night.

The nurse, who did not seem unkind, tried to cheer them ; finding, however, that her attempts were vain she soon gave them up, and

devoted her attention to making herself comfortable, and telling the new under-nurse what she expected of her.

That night Olga, who was more miserable than ever, was specially careful to ascertain that the new nurse was not awake before she ventured to her window. She was relieved to find that both the nurse and poor little Eric, who was worn out with crying, were sleeping soundly. She had prudently told the new maid that she did not like her shutters closed, so she had only to draw aside her curtains, and what was her joy when she saw both Mustard and Red Cap standing beneath her window !

Quickly and quietly shutting the door between the rooms she threw open the window and leaning out said—

‘Oh, I *am* glad to see you ! Is the sentry out of the way ?’

‘Yes, we have found means to keep him quiet for a bit,’ replied Red Cap. ‘Listen, do you want to get away from here ?’

‘Indeed I do, and to take Eric. That cruel Count Vladimir has taken every one from us, first Countess Sophy and Irene and Xenia, and now Nania and Catherine. I know he wants to

kill Eric, Marco said so, and I am sure he is right.'

'Quite so,' returned the boy. 'Well, we have no time to lose. Where does Eric sleep?'

'In the room joining this, with the new nurse.'

'There is no one else in his room or yours?'

'No; two maids sleep in a room opposite, but there is a passage between, and they cannot hear anything when the doors are shut.'

'All right, then it is fairly easy. Look here: Mustard will bring you up this box of powder. We have quieted the sentry with it to-night and we'll do so again to-morrow. You have only to scatter a little of it close to a person's mouth and nose, so that he may smell it, and it puts him off to sleep for half an hour at least. Mustard got on a tree under which the sentry always stands for a bit, and threw some into his collar. You must scatter some on to the nurse's pillow and Eric's too, so that he may not cry.'

'Won't it hurt him?'

'Not a bit. You can try it on a dog or bird if you like, to make sure. Now, Mustard, up with you.'

By the posts of a narrow verandah which was just under Olga's window, and by a few projecting



THE MONKEY GAVE
THE BOX TO THE
LITTLE GIRL.

stone ornaments above, the active monkey easily reached the window-sill and gave the box to the little girl. While he was climbing, Red Cap hastily explained that she must scatter the powder on the pillows exactly when the Castle clock struck eleven, and that he and Mustard would be under her window with the means of escape a few minutes later.

Olga nodded assent, for the risk of continuing the conversation was great. Mustard and Red Cap quickly disappeared and she softly shut the window, drew the curtains, and opened the door between the rooms. Then quite tired out, yet with new hope in her heart, the poor little girl crept back to bed and was soon fast asleep.

Next morning Olga contrived to try the effect of the powder on a cat which lived in the nursery and happened to be lying on the hearth-rug. She sat down near it with her doll in her arms, and, while pretending to feed the doll, scattered some of the contents of the box near the cat's whiskers. Puss was sound asleep in two minutes, and about three quarters of an hour afterwards woke up as lively as possible ; so Olga was perfectly satisfied, and awaited the evening with much hidden excitement and

tolerable assurance of success. When Vladimir came in the course of the day to see the nurse, she told him that the children had behaved very well, that Prince Eric naturally fretted a little, but that Princess Olga did her best to keep her brother in good spirits. This was more than the Count expected, and fortunately soothed his temper and put him off his guard.

As soon as she had assured herself that the nurse was asleep, Olga dressed herself all but her shoes and then lay awake, trembling with expectation, till the castle clock slowly sounded the appointed hour. At the last stroke she jumped out of bed and hurried into the next room, where she scattered the powder as directed. Then she returned to the window, put on her shoes while waiting, and directly she had done so saw her friends and quickly opened the window. The moon was in its first quarter so there was light enough, yet not too much. Red Cap made her a sign and said in a low clear voice, 'Fetch Eric.'

She ran into the child's room and lifted him out of his little bed, overjoyed to find that neither he nor the nurse moved. She wrapped him in a warm cloak which she had ready, and took him

back into her own room, where she found that Mustard was waiting for her, crouched on the window-sill and holding a rope ladder in readiness.

‘Come down the ladder at once,’ said Red Cap. ‘Lay the baby on a chair near Mustard. He will not stir, and directly you are down Mustard will bring him.’

Olga was rather unwilling to leave the child for a moment. However, she knew that she could not safely carry him down the ladder, and that the best thing was to obey orders without dispute; so she descended as rapidly as she could. The moment her foot touched the ground Mustard let the ladder go, Red Cap picked it up and rolled it into a bundle. By the time he had done this Mustard was at Olga’s side, and placed her little brother in the arms which she joyfully held out to receive him.

‘Now come, don’t say a word, and follow me closely,’ said Red Cap taking her hand, and he led the way rapidly by the terraces and the well-remembered woodland path till they reached the garden where they had first met.

‘We must get out, if possible, before Eric

wakes,' whispered the boy, picking his way amongst the trees by the side of the stream. 'If he is like most babies he is bound to howl when he opens his eyes.'

'He very seldom howls as you call it,' asserted Olga, 'but of course it will be very funny to wake out of doors in the dark.'

'Hush, don't speak so loud,' continued Red Cap, and they went on for a few minutes in silence. 'Ah!' he exclaimed presently in a subdued tone, 'here we are—now for it.' They had reached the low arch in the wall under which the stream ran out of the enclosed grounds, and bending down Olga could just see that a boat was waiting for them outside.

'Now,' said the boy, 'you must let me hold that child while Mustard lifts you through, and then he will give him back to you in the boat.'

Mustard, who resembled a chimpanzee more than any other sort of monkey, was as tall as a small man, and when he stood in the stream his head was just above the level of the water. His long and strong arms easily carried Olga through the arch, and to her surprise she

found herself received and lifted into the boat by another monkey who was waiting outside. Eric was promptly handed out to her, and Red Cap was conveyed to the boat in the same manner.

Then Mustard and the monkey who had been standing in the stream got in, and they were swiftly rowed off by four other monkeys who formed the boat's crew. Mustard and his companion presently also took oars, and with six strong rowers they were soon out of sight of the castle wall.

'There,' said Red Cap with an air of immense relief, 'now I think we are all right, anyhow for the present, and Eric may wake if he likes. I had a little more powder ready, but my mother told me I had better not give him more than one dose if I could help it. Here is a bottle of milk though, and some cakes for both of you.'

'You *are* a good kind boy,' cried Olga; 'look, Eric is waking up—isn't he a darling?'

Eric indeed opened his eyes at that minute and seemed inclined to cry. Mustard, however, who evidently thought that he was deputy-nurse, stopped rowing, uncorked the

bottle with the greatest promptitude, and handed it and a cup to Red Cap, who poured out some milk and gave it to Olga that she might feed her brother without delay. He was then provided with a cake, and having eaten it went to sleep again, after a good stare at the monkeys with whom he fortunately seemed rather pleased than otherwise.

‘Now,’ said Olga, ‘please tell me if it is not a secret. Where are we going? Shall we see your mother? and are all your monkeys as nice and clever as my dear Mustard?’

‘Yes,’ replied Red Cap, ‘we are going to my mother. She and my father live on an island in the great sea into which this stream, which soon widens into a river, runs. By sunrise, if nothing happens to delay us, we shall reach its mouth, and a ship is waiting for us just outside. My father and mother are ready to welcome you, and some day I expect they will tell you all about our island and our monkeys. Now you had better lie down at the bottom of the boat and go to sleep like Eric. You are quite safe, and we shall not be at the river’s mouth for six or seven hours.’

Olga took his advice. She was soon asleep, and when she opened her eyes again little waves were dashing on a deserted beach, and the spray tossed up as they broke upon the rocks glittered in the beams of the rising sun.

Their boat pitched to and fro rather uncomfortably as it rowed over the bar of sand where the river ran into the sea, but the waters beyond were smooth enough, and before Eric had time to be frightened they were alongside of a good-sized ship, and were quickly helped up the ladder which was lowered as they approached.

As they stepped on deck a flag was run up to the top of the mainmast, bearing as its emblem a red rose on a white ground, and immediately all the sails were set and the ship stood out to sea.

Olga had become so accustomed to the skill of her monkey acquaintance that she was less astonished than might have been expected to find that the whole crew of the ship consisted of monkeys. The officers even wore a kind of uniform—scarlet shirts, leather belts, and caps; the common sailors had not troubled themselves with clothes

The morning was delightful, and the first part of the voyage when the ship sailed amongst numerous little islands, which cast purple shadows into the deep blue sea, enchanted Olga. The monkeys had prepared an excellent breakfast, and after it was over she sat on a chair on deck with Eric in her arms, and the little boy, delighted with the bright sunshine, the fresh air, and the frolics of the monkey sailors, clapped his hands, and tried to answer his sister's merry words in his broken baby language.

He soon made friends with Red Cap, who seated himself at Olga's feet and told her that they might expect to reach the island where his parents lived on the following evening.

'My mother will tell you all our history and explain whatever puzzles you better than I can do, so I shall leave it to her,' he added. 'Perhaps, however, I had better warn you that she, my father and myself, are the only human creatures on the island. All our subjects are monkeys.'

'I don't mind if they are all as good-natured as Mustard and the monkeys on the ship,' answered Olga, 'they amuse Eric very much.'

‘He is a little monkey himself,’ laughed Red Cap; ‘I am sure he wants to climb up that mast.’

‘He is not such a monkey as you,’ retorted Olga, whose spirits were rapidly rising with the sense of safety and freedom, ‘he never tried to pull down my rockery.’

‘And he never built you a bridge instead.’

‘You didn’t finish it.’

‘That wasn’t my fault. By the way, what has happened to old Thrashem?’

‘Poor Ivan!’ sighed the child, becoming grave again. ‘Count Vladimir put him in prison because he would not swear to obey him. I think he is more angry with him than with almost any one, for he would not agree that Vladimir was next heir after Eric. He said I was.’

‘Of course you are. Who cares what Vladimir says? Never you mind. We will have out Thrashem, and all the ladies and nurses and every one who has treated you properly, and we will lock old Vladimir up in the very deepest dungeon in all Lorlonia. Now tell me all about it. I only know little bits of your story here and there. We have nothing to do till

dinner-time, and if Eric gets tired of sitting still Mustard shall walk about with him and continue his monkey education.'

Olga told him about her past life, her parents, her friends, and all that she knew of the plots of Vladimir and Nicholas, and of their success up to the present time. Of course there was much that she did not know, and she had never heard of the Rose City, nor of Vladimir's visit to the dwarfs and their master on Midsummer Eve.

In conclusion, she showed him the Hospodar's ring which she wore on a ribbon tied round her neck and hidden inside her frock. 'If I could send him that,' she said, 'I think he would do something to help us. He is a good, brave man, and he would not let Cousin Vladimir take everything away from Eric without fighting him in some way.'

'Why, how funny!' exclaimed Red Cap, as he examined the ring which Olga held out to him. 'Do you see, Olga? The seal part of this ring is exactly the same as our flag. It has a red rose, made out of a ruby or some shining stone like that, set into a white ground. I wonder what it means.'

‘I don’t know anything about it except that my father gave it to Jagellon, the Hospodar of Dorzyn. I think I remember seeing it on my father’s finger a long time ago, but I am not sure.’

‘I think I have heard something about a ring that was to bring good luck to our island, but I am not sure either. However, my father will know, so we must wait till we get home.’

‘There is one thing you might tell me now,’ said Olga, ‘what is your name? you cannot be really called Red Cap.’

‘Why not? I wear a red cap.’

‘Yes, but you were not born with a red cap; and anyhow, people are not called after their clothes.’

The boy tried to make her guess, and, as she failed after six or seven trials, he finally told her that his name was Raymond, that his father was Duke Ludovic, and his mother the Duchess Almida.

Dinner was now ready, and after dinner Eric went to sleep. With fair weather, games, and talks the time sped pleasantly on, till towards the evening of the second day the monkey on

watch vigorously waved his long arm, and Raymond cried eagerly : ‘Come, Olga, we are nearly there. Do you see the blue hill-tops rising above the horizon ? that is our home - that is Monkey Island !’

CHAPTER IX

MONKEY ISLAND

THE soft rounded hills of Monkey Island, clothed nearly to their summits with dark green trees, stood out clear against the setting sun as the ship cast anchor in the sheltered harbour.

Around the harbour, and at the foot of these pleasant hills, was built the capital city of the island. It was a small one, and consisted chiefly of huts, for few of the monkeys cared to live in houses, preferring in that land of perpetual summer to sleep in trees or caves and to spend the day in the woods and fields.

Duke Ludovic, however, had a large white house, over which floated a banner bearing the same design as the ship's ensign, and some of his councillors, who were chosen from the

older and staid apes, thought that it befitted their dignity to possess huts, even if they did not care to spend much time within four walls, and generally slept on the roofs rather than under them. There were also a few warehouses wherein were stowed food and other articles not required for immediate use, and a Hall of Council which was the pride of all the inhabitants of the island, being built, so said tradition, after the pattern of a great palace in the unknown city from which their forefathers had come in forgotten days.

No sooner had Raymond's ship entered the harbour than a large boat, gaily painted and provided with an awning of scarlet silk, put off from a small stone pier which ran out into the water opposite the ducal Palace.

'There are my father and mother!' cried Raymond, and he hurried to the side of the ship to welcome them.

Duke Ludovic, a tall, handsome man, soon stepped on board, warmly greeted Olga, and taking Eric in his arms, said :

'Welcome, my little Prince, to Monkey Island. It is not the first time that this land has given shelter to exiles. May you not have

to wait so long for your rights as those who came before you !’

The little boy looked solemnly at his new friend. Apparently he had been introduced to so many strange people and strange places of late that novelty ceased to alarm him, and he allowed the Duke to carry him down the steps into the boat, and hand him over to the Duchess without raising the least objection. Duchess Almida, a plump, good-looking lady with blue eyes and light-brown hair, received him and Olga with the greatest kindness, called them ‘Poor dear children !’ asked if they had liked the cakes, and regretted that she had not sent clothes for Eric, who was still in his night-gown and cloak.

‘However,’ she said, ‘we will soon put that right. I have some old things of Raymond’s at the Palace, which he can wear till we get new ones made.’

The landing-place was thronged with monkeys—fathers, mothers, and dear little baby apes, with whom Olga was quite enraptured. She longed to stop and play with them, but was obliged to defer that pleasure, as porters carrying chairs with hoods to keep off the sun, were awaiting them, and trotted off with them to the Palace.

Here she found the Duchess's ladies, monkeys distinguished by white caps and petticoats, who looked so like nurses that the children felt quite at home with them ; and Eric was fed and stowed away in a nice little white bed quite as if he had been in his own castle.

'Now,' said Almida, when she had satisfied herself that he was comfortably asleep, and that Olga and Raymond had had a good supper, 'now, my dear, if you are not too tired, come and tell the Duke all your adventures. Raymond has told us something of your history, but we want to know a great deal more.'

'I think I told Raymond everything yesterday, your Grace,' replied the little girl, rather shyly.

'Yes, but you must tell papa and mama, Olga. I cannot repeat it all properly, though I will listen and remind you if you have forgotten anything.'

So Olga told the story all over again, adding how very kind Raymond and Mustard had been, and describing fully all that they had done for her and Eric. She ended by saying, 'I cannot think why Raymond should have taken so much trouble to help and save us, only because I found

him in the garden. If Eric grows up and gets his country back we will do everything we can to show how grateful we are.'

'You may do something for us yet, my dear,' answered Ludovic, smiling. 'Now show me the Hospodar's ring. Raymond told me there was something curious about it. I did not quite understand what he meant.'

Olga drew out the ring, and Duke Ludovic started in amazement when he saw it.

'Surely, Almida,' he cried, 'this must be the lost ring of the prophecy. "The golden-haired child, and the ring of the rose." What were the words?'

Almida half said, half sung, to an old, old tune—

'Never again shall chief and knight
In feast or fray meet friends or foes,
Till the gold-haired child with baby bright
Shall bring to the Island the Ring of the Rose.'

'Yes,' cried Raymond, excitedly, 'and it goes on—

'Then shall shatter the Master's sleep,
Then the fountain its strength disclose ;
The knights shall triumph, the dwarfs shall weep
In the Crimson City, the Hall of the Rose.'

watch vigorously waved his long arm, and Raymond cried eagerly : ‘Come, Olga, we are nearly there. Do you see the blue hill-tops rising above the horizon ? that is our home · that is Monkey Island !’

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'Welcome, my little Prince, to Monkey Island. It is not the first time that this land has given shelter to exiles. May you not have

to wait so long for your rights as those who came before you !’

The little boy looked solemnly at his new friend. Apparently he had been introduced to so many strange people and strange places of late that novelty ceased to alarm him, and he allowed the Duke to carry him down the steps into the boat, and hand him over to the Duchess without raising the least objection. Duchess Almida, a plump, good-looking lady with blue eyes and light-brown hair, received him and Olga with the greatest kindness, called them ‘Poor dear children !’ asked if they had liked the cakes, and regretted that she had not sent clothes for Eric, who was still in his night-gown and cloak.

‘However,’ she said, ‘we will soon put that right. I have some old things of Raymond’s at the Palace, which he can wear till we get new ones made.’

The landing-place was thronged with monkeys—fathers, mothers, and dear little baby apes, with whom Olga was quite enraptured. She longed to stop and play with them, but was obliged to defer that pleasure, as porters carrying chairs with hoods to keep off the sun, were awaiting them, and trotted off with them to the Palace.

Here she found the Duchess's ladies, monkeys distinguished by white caps and petticoats, who looked so like nurses that the children felt quite at home with them ; and Eric was fed and stowed away in a nice little white bed quite as if he had been in his own castle.

'Now,' said Almida, when she had satisfied herself that he was comfortably asleep, and that Olga and Raymond had had a good supper, 'now, my dear, if you are not too tired, come and tell the Duke all your adventures. Raymond has told us something of your history, but we want to know a great deal more.'

'I think I told Raymond everything yesterday, your Grace,' replied the little girl, rather shyly.

'Yes, but you must tell papa and mama, Olga. I cannot repeat it all properly, though I will listen and remind you if you have forgotten anything.'

So Olga told the story all over again, adding how very kind Raymond and Mustard had been, and describing fully all that they had done for her and Eric. She ended by saying, 'I cannot think why Raymond should have taken so much trouble to help and save us, only because I found

him in the garden. If Eric grows up and gets his country back we will do everything we can to show how grateful we are.'

'You may do something for us yet, my dear,' answered Ludovic, smiling. 'Now show me the Hospodar's ring. Raymond told me there was something curious about it. I did not quite understand what he meant.'

Olga drew out the ring, and Duke Ludovic started in amazement when he saw it.

'Surely, Almida,' he cried, 'this must be the lost ring of the prophecy. "The golden-haired child, and the ring of the rose." What were the words?'

Almida half said, half sung, to an old, old tune—

'Never again shall chief and knight
In feast or fray meet friends or foes,
Till the gold-haired child with baby bright
Shall bring to the Island the Ring of the Rose.'

'Yes,' cried Raymond, excitedly, 'and it goes on—

'Then shall shatter the Master's sleep,
Then the fountain its strength disclose ;
The knights shall triumph, the dwarfs shall weep
In the Crimson City, the Hall of the Rose.'

‘I knew there was some story about a ring that was to bring us good fortune, but I had forgotten exactly what it was.’

‘You do not know *exactly* now, do you?’ said his father, amused at his impatience.

‘Here is Olga, looking quite perplexed, as she well may be. You have told us your story, my dear,’ he added, turning to the little girl, ‘and now I must tell you ours. It is quite as melancholy in the past, and the future ending seems even more uncertain. Perhaps I should not have told you so much as I am about to do, had it not become plain that we must help each other, and, young as you are, you have had to understand and to do so much for yourself and your little brother, that you will not be alarmed by the idea of what lies before you.

‘Well, you must know that some three hundred years ago the ancestors of my subjects on this island were not monkeys, but brave knights and beautiful ladies with their squires, servants and attendants. They lived in a splendid city in a distant land. I have never been there, nor do I know exactly where it is. The legends concerning it are confused and uncertain, and we do not even know precisely

how my forefathers lost it. They were rulers in their own country, and they quarrelled with a powerful enchanter who turned the whole population of the city into monkeys and drove them away. He could not transform the Duke and Duchess and their children in the same manner, but he was able to cast a spell upon them which obliged them and the direct line of rulers to live in exile among their former subjects and their monkey descendants, and which has prevented them from finding out the whereabouts of their former Dukedom or taking any steps to recover it up to the present time.

‘Each Duke in turn has to choose a wife among human beings. When he has done so the lady who has consented to marry him must live with him on the Island, and they can only visit foreign countries to seek a bride for their eldest son, or to take their other children to live with their mother’s relations.

‘When you first met Raymond we had just left our two younger children with their uncle to be educated, and were on our way home. Our little boy and girl may never return to live here, so you can understand that the fate cast on our house by the enchanter’s spell is a sad

one, and that we long to break it. Perhaps you have brought us the means of so doing. Now, however, it is late, and you must go to bed. To-morrow we will assemble the Council. They shall see your ring, hear your story, and consider whether the old traditions point out what is best to be done.'

Very solemn was the meeting of the Monkey Council in their great hall. Olga was surprised to see such a fine building, with its high dome and handsome colonnade running round the paved space in the centre.

Thirty monkeys in purple tunics squatted on this pavement, and all rose and saluted as the Duke and Duchess with the three children, and the ducal guards carrying pikes, entered the hall and took their places under the colonnade.

Olga had already discovered that the monkeys spoke a language of their own, partly consisting of certain sounds and partly of gestures, and an animated discussion was soon in progress. The speakers all looked at her and Eric, and Raymond whispered to her that his father had explained to the Council who they were and whence they had come, and that the councillors, though pleased to see them, seemed uncertain as

to how long the laws of the island would allow them to stay.

‘You won’t send us away, will you?’ whispered the little girl in return.

‘No, no; it is all right. Hush! my father is speaking again.’

Duke Ludovic had indeed risen to his feet, and all were silent, while he made another short speech ending by pointing to Olga.

Raymond said hastily in a low voice, ‘He has told them about the ring. Pull it out, please.’

Olga did so, and the boy added, ‘Would you mind taking off the ribbon and letting them see the stone?’

Olga slipped the ribbon over her head, and Raymond, with his father’s consent, carried the ring round to each member of the Council in turn. All appeared astonished, and one or two showed a desire to take the ring into their own hands for closer examination. This Raymond would not allow, till he reached an old monkey who appeared to be the President. He handed the treasure to him with a low bow, and stood by while he inspected it.

The patriarch gave a deep ‘Ah-h!’ which seemed to express even more satisfaction than

surprise, and addressed a few words to the Duke, who, turning to Olga, said,

‘It is as I thought. Handaman, the President of our Council, is descended from the keeper of the ducal treasures, who was transformed into an ape like the other officers of the household at the time of our exile. He brought with him certain precious relics, and amongst them a pink marble casket said to contain instructions as to how we may recover all that we lost. No one has hitherto been able to break it open.

‘Handaman now tells me that the tradition handed down from father to son in his family is that a golden-haired child with a baby boy should some day come to the Island and bring with her a ring bearing the emblem of our house, and that this ring should open the casket.’

‘He said something else, papa,’ remarked Raymond.

‘Never mind that, my boy,’ said his father, smiling.

‘I do mind,’ murmured Raymond; and he whispered to his companion, ‘He said she should be the bride of the heir.’

‘What nonsense,’ returned Olga. ‘We have something else to attend to at present.’

So it appeared ; for a fresh and still more lively debate began among the monkeys, at the end of which Ludovic informed Olga that it was decided that the Council should go immediately to the underground chamber in which the treasures were kept, and that if she would consent to do so, she herself should touch the casket with the ring in their presence and witness the result.

Olga readily agreed ; and the Duchess thoughtfully added that the expedition might frighten Eric, and that it would be better for him to play in the Palace garden with Mustard and two of the ladies while they were away.

Raymond and Olga therefore took him back to the Duke's house, and left him perfectly content, while they returned to the Council Hall and found all the monkeys anxiously awaiting them, with torches to light them down the flight of steps and through the dark galleries leading to the Treasure House. The Treasure House itself was a long, low, vaulted chamber, and all round were iron rings or brackets into which the monkeys thrust their torches. The ducal guards stood at the entrance to keep out all intruders, while the councillors, under Handaman's directions, removed one

padlocked box after another, till they disclosed a secret recess in which was placed what was evidently the greatest of all the treasures, the pink marble casket.

It was not very large, about fifteen inches long and six high, and not a sign was there of any opening whatsoever. In fact, it might have been a simple block of polished marble, shining and delicately veined, but not otherwise remarkable, were it not that if any one lifted it and shook it backwards and forwards, he could hear something slip about inside, and moreover it was not so heavy as it would have been had it consisted of solid marble throughout.

Handaman took it and brought it into the centre of the chamber, where he placed it on one of the large boxes which had just been pulled forward. He then told the other monkeys to clear a space and form themselves into a ring, and begged the Duke and Duchess, Raymond and Olga, to come into the middle.

He returned the ring, which he had hitherto held, to the little girl, and said something which Ludovic explained :—

‘He does not know how or where you must touch the casket, but is sure that you can

open it with the ring. He asks you to press it all round, where lids generally fit on to boxes, until you come to the right place.'

Olga did as he asked without producing the slightest effect. She then struck the four corners, the top, the bottom, still nothing happened. She tried every inch of the surface in vain. The Duke and Duchess and all the others present in turn took the ring and tried the experiment with equal failure.

The monkeys looked as gloomy as it is possible for monkeys to look, and hope was rapidly fading into despair, when Raymond, who had been wandering round in an aimless manner, took it into his head to peer into the recess whence the box had been taken, and exclaimed :

'Why, there are some letters carved here, right at the back ! Bring a light, quick !'

The councillors understood human language perfectly though they could not speak it, and one ran forward with a torch. Raymond, after a little puzzling, made out this verse—

Not to Chieftain, Duke, or King,
To gold-haired child the casket shows
The fated scroll ;—let her kiss the ring,
And thrice let the marble be touched with the rose.

Not a moment did Olga hesitate. She hastily kissed the ring, and thrice touched the casket with the signet. The result was instantaneous. The lid of the casket flew open as if a hidden spring had been pressed, and disclosed to the eager spectators a roll of yellow parchment. Handaman took it out and gave it to the Duke with a low bow. Raymond squeezed Olga's hand and the Duchess kissed her while Ludovic read aloud as follows—

*To the children of the Rose City. You will hear these words
far from the land of your Fathers.*

Know then that your home lies between the Black Mountains, the Great Forest and the Plains of Mandania, where the country of the Princes of Lorlonia joins the country of the King. To seek it sail to the shore where the forest meets the sea. Land where two tall marble columns mark a roadstead which was once the port of the Rose City.

March straight to the north till you see the Black Mountains rising to the east. Then, as you leave the forest, the Crimson City will lie before you.

Let those who go bear the swords of their fathers, and attack the City before sunrise on the last day of the old year, for thus only can you conquer.

Let her who unseals the casket go with you to unseal the spring wherein if you bathe you shall once more be as your forefathers.

When you have won, bring back those left in the island and let them do likewise.

This is the doom and destiny which courage can fulfil. In the hour of triumph be merciful to the vanquished, and faithful to the Princes of Lorlonia, for your fate is enwoven with theirs.

CHAPTER X

THE COUNCIL

It is easy to imagine the excitement of the Council on hearing the contents of the scroll—an excitement which rapidly spread throughout the Island.

For three hundred years generation after generation had known that a spell hung over them, that they were not what they should have been. Monkey parents had taught their monkey children that they must learn what they could of the ways and arts of human beings, for that the day might come when they would be called upon to take their place in the civilised world.

A strange limit, however, invariably stopped them when they reached a certain point in their education. All that could be done with hands

alone they learnt easily ; but to read, to write, or to draw, was impossible to them. They could build houses, till the fields, and tend cattle, if their Duke or his son superintended them ; left to themselves they generally became confused and ceased their labours. While like other monkeys they were fond of oysters and shell-fish, unlike them they were expert divers, and their rulers gained most of their wealth from pearl fisheries. Their Dukes had from time to time attempted to bring in other human beings to live in the island and direct their subjects, these efforts had hitherto been vain ; the enchanter's spell forbade them, and some accident had always proved fatal to the incomers, or had at least obliged their departure. Now monkey said to monkey, ' We shall have our own again ; we shall fight for our rights and win them ! We shall be men like our forefathers ! '

All the monkeys who heard the news rushed to the Palace, and the gardens and grounds around it were thronged from morning till evening with eager crowds. If Olga appeared they fell on their knees before her and tried to kiss her hands, her frock, even her little shoes.

As for Eric, Mustard and the ladies hardly

dared take him beyond the balcony, for every mother monkey in the island wanted to nurse the little Prince.

They had gathered from the reports of the councillors, who had heard the parchment read, that their ancient rulers came from the country of the Princes of Lorlonia, and that their fortunes were bound up with those of their feudal lords. They looked upon the children as deliverers and heralds of victory, and swore again and again that when they had recovered their own heritage they would never rest until the rightful heir was restored to the home of his fathers. Another and still more solemn Council was soon held to discuss the means of carrying the directions of the parchment into effect, and while it was sitting, impatient crowds awaited its decisions outside the hall.

It is hardly necessary to remark that almost every councillor had a great deal of good advice to give, and many objections to make to the suggestions of the last speaker.

At length one cantankerous ape arose and said :

‘Why should we trouble ourselves in the matter? Who knows if this old parchment is

not altogether a fraud? Handaman may have hidden it in that precious box, and have touched a spring when the young lady did what she was told to do by a doggerel which he himself had cut in the rock. Even if the parchment had been lying there for several hundred years it was probably written by some one who knew that his descendants would be as idiotic as himself' (a disgusted howl arose from all his hearers), 'and I at all events am not prepared to undertake a wild-goose chase on the strength of it.'

'Nobody wants you ! Remain a monkey for the rest of your days ! More like a cranky old bear !'

A torrent of such shouts fell upon the devoted head of the unfortunate objector, and Handaman sprang indignantly to his feet, and in a long and eloquent reply assured them that never before in a long life of devotion to his country, &c., &c., &c.

At length Ludovic thought it was time to interrupt the tempest of applause which greeted the President's reply, and to get to business. He therefore arose, and the respect which the wildest monkey always showed to the man who governed them kept the assembly in rapt atten-

tion while he addressed it : ' Monkeys,' said he, — ' soon to be men '—(cheers), ' two points have to be settled. First, will you undertake the enterprise pointed out to you ? ' (Cries of ' We will. ') ' Secondly, how are you going to do it ? ' (' That is the question ? ' from the cantankerous ape, and shouts of ' We will fight ! '—' You will lead us,' from his colleagues.) ' I will put these questions in order to the Council. Don't all speak at once. Let those who are in favour of undertaking the re-capture of the Rose City say " aye. " '

A howl of ' Aye ' from twenty-nine monkeys responded to his appeal.

' Now those of the contrary opinion. '

The cantankerous monkey jumped up.

' I protest,' said he, ' but my fools of fellow-councillors evidently mean to go and get their throats cut instead of staying quietly at home. If they succeed in turning themselves into anything it will be into asses, not men. For my part I prefer to be a monkey, so decline to have anything more to do with them. Good morning ! ' And he marched out of the hall with all the dignity at his command.

' The minority has withdrawn,' remarked the

Duke quietly, 'and the first point is carried unanimously. On the second question, How are you going to do it? I will make a very few remarks. We shall have to go in a ship, so let no monkey volunteer who is afraid of the sea'; (one or two became very serious). 'Those who go are to take the swords of their fathers. It will therefore be necessary to find out how many monkeys on the island have preserved their ancestral swords. We shall have to fight, so let no one come who is not ready to be drilled first; (two or three others here became grave). Lastly, we must persuade Princess Olga to come with us. I will undertake to arrange matters with Princess Olga, and for the rest I propose that the Council adjourn till this time to-morrow, and that in the meantime the members do ascertain how many monkeys are ready to go to sea, to be drilled first, and fight afterwards; and how many swords belonging to their ancestors can be produced by the combatants. Let the names, and, if possible, the volunteers, be brought here to-morrow. Are all agreed?'

No monkey had any objection to offer, though they were rather less keen when it came to acting instead of talking. Nevertheless, Handaman

arose and assured his Grace that they were all agreed, and that his injunctions should be strictly carried out. The assembly then dispersed, and the Duke went to look for Olga. The little girl, though ready to accompany the army, raised two difficulties. What was to happen to Eric? and how was she to send the ring to the Hospodar?

‘My dear child,’ said Almida, ‘I will take every care of Eric while you are gone; and why should you send to the Hospodar? If the Duke can regain his position, and if his subjects turn back again into knights and soldiers, be sure that he will hasten to acknowledge your brother as his feudal lord, and to replace him on the throne of Lorlonia.’

‘Yes—but—’ replied Olga, hesitating.

‘You think there are two “ifs” in all this?’ said the Duke, smiling rather sadly. ‘Well, I agree; however, what do you think of this idea? We are still in August, and it will be useless for us to set off before December. We are not to attack the city till the last day of the old year, and my monkeys who are accustomed to warmth must not be kept longer than possible in a climate far colder than this. There will be

plenty of time to send to the Hospodar and to get his answer and advice before we go. He will tell you what help you may expect from him, and whether he thinks that the possible advantage which Eric might gain by enlisting so many fresh and faithful subjects in his cause would justify you in leaving him with my wife. In any case your brother will have three months in which to become accustomed to the Duchess and her ladies.'

'Oh, yes,' said Olga, much relieved; 'and you will let Mustard take the ring, will you not?'

'If you wish it,' replied Ludovic. 'But would not Eric miss him? Capsicum is as faithful as Mustard, and knows the way better, for he attended me when I went to marry the Duchess, and we passed not far from Dorzyn.'

To Capsicum Olga accordingly entrusted the precious ring with a long letter to the Hospodar, in which she explained everything as well as she could, and ended by imploring his advice, and begging him in any case to return the ring, which was so precious to her new friends. Before the ship with Capsicum on board had left Monkey Island, the volunteers, who were

afraid neither of sea-sickness nor fighting, and who were also possessed of the necessary weapons, had been selected. They were found to consist of two hundred monkeys all told, in addition to Ludovic and Raymond, and the Duke set to work to drill them without delay.

The population of the island amounted to many thousands, but Ludovic felt that it would be worse than useless to take monkeys who did not fulfil the necessary conditions, and that he would have a much better chance of success with a small, well-disciplined force.

Early in September Olga was sitting on the parade-ground with Eric in her arms. Both were watching with much interest the performances of the newly-raised regiments, when Mustard came running towards them waving his arms and shouting in his own language, of which Olga now understood a few words, 'The ship ! the ship !'

She ran quickly to the pier, and in a few minutes the ship cast anchor, and Capsicum, landing in the little boat, bowed before her, and gave her a sealed packet.

Anxiously she broke the seal, and found that it contained, together with the ring, the follow-

ing letter, which, after giving Eric into the charge of Mustard, she proceeded to read :—

‘To my honoured Princess Olga,—I was indeed glad to receive your letter and to know that you and your brother were for the time being in safety. Count Vladimir was, as you may imagine, furious at your flight. He tried for a time to conceal it, and when he found this impossible, he accused Count and Countess Macovros of having stolen you away. All is confusion. Unfortunately, Vladimir has persuaded several of the nobles that he is your true friend. His brother-in-law, Sir Witold, has helped him greatly, and has also deceived large numbers of the townspeople and countrymen, among whom he has sent messengers in various disguises. I would prefer that you and Eric should be brought to one of the sea-ports, and that I should receive you there and take charge of you both, but Vladimir has garrisoned all the sea-ports, and, as you know, they are to the south of Lorlonia, whereas Dorzyn lies to the north-west, and I must force my way through land occupied by Vladimir’s troops before I can meet you anywhere. Autumn is near, and it is a bad time of the year for

beginning a campaign ; still, if fair means are of no avail, fight I must. On the whole, I think you had better leave Eric with the Duchess. He will be safe and happy with her ; and since Duke Ludovic wishes you to accompany his army, I cannot oppose your doing so, if you are not afraid. I have heard rumours at different times of the strange tale of the Rose City and the Monkey Island which you now tell me, and it may be true that you, a child of Lorlonia, are fated to free the descendants of your ancestor's vassals. In any case, I will try and meet you in December somewhere between Mandania and the Great Forest beyond the marble mines, for I understand that the city lies in that direction some three days' march from the sea. I will gather together what friends I can, and if Duke Ludovic is able to help us, all may yet be well. Keep a good heart, and kiss Eric for me.—Your devoted friend and faithful knight, JAGELLON, Hospodar of Dorzyn.'

Without further hesitation Olga agreed to the wishes of the Duke and his subjects, and consoled herself with the idea that she could still be happy with Eric for two months at least,

and would then only leave him for a very short time. The nineteenth of September was his first birthday, which was celebrated throughout the island as a great festival. The Duke ordered a grand review for the occasion, and in the evening there was a magnificent display of fireworks.

Three months later the good ship *Almida*, bearing the rose banner, sailed from the island manned with a picked crew, and carrying with her Ludovic, Raymond, and Olga, the two hundred trained monkeys, and the hopes and good wishes of the whole population.

The voyage was uneventful, for they knew well how to avoid the ordinary track of ships, and, moreover, were not making for any of the usual sea-ports.

The Great Forest was rather nearer to the island than the river down which Raymond had escaped with the children, and by noon on the second day of their voyage they began to near the coast, and to look out for the marble pillars which marked the deserted roadstead.

‘There they are!’ cried the keen-eyed Raymond just as the look-out monkey gave the same warning.

By careful soundings they found safe anchorage for their ship under the shelter of a little promontory, and on Christmas Day Ludovic landed his forces, telling Olga that he hoped they would all have a happier time next year. The crew was left in charge of the ship, with strict orders to keep themselves concealed and to put out to sea if they perceived any one coming who was likely to board the vessel.

‘I do not think it probable,’ added the Duke; ‘and we shall look to find you waiting for us when we return victorious some ten days hence.’

Ludovic had been very glad of the Hospodar’s information that the city was supposed to be some three days’ march from the sea, and had allowed a little extra time in case of accidents.

He and his monkeys marched slowly through the forest in detached parties of ten or a dozen, keeping near enough to each other to be able to summon aid in case of danger, without attracting attention by the passage of a large party.

Olga, amply provided with warm garments and coverings, was carried in a chair guarded by Ludovic, Raymond, and a chosen band. The

Duke, moreover, fearing lest creatures accustomed to tropical warmth should suffer in colder climes, had provided each monkey with a blanket as a protection against the chill winds of evening. The country through which they had to pass was not wrapped in snow like more northern regions, yet there was a sharp touch of frost in the air, and the tall leafless trees looked strangely gaunt and weird as the soldier-apes marched beneath them by day, or curled themselves up in their branches by night.

Two days before that fixed for the attack, the adventurers saw the Black Mountains rising to the east, the trees stood further apart, and the rays of winter sunlight sparkled more freely on the short grass.

‘We are drawing near the city,’ cried Raymond. ‘How I long to hasten on and scale the walls!’

‘Quietly, my boy,’ replied Ludovic; ‘we must halt here. Give the signal for our forces to assemble as soon as evening falls.’

The message was passed on quickly from band to band, and when twilight came the hairy, long-armed warriors drew together round their leader.

to how long the laws of the island would allow them to stay.

‘You won’t send us away, will you?’ whispered the little girl in return.

‘No, no; it is all right. Hush! my father is speaking again.’

Duke Ludovic had indeed risen to his feet, and all were silent, while he made another short speech ending by pointing to Olga.

Raymond said hastily in a low voice, ‘He has told them about the ring. Pull it out, please.’

Olga did so, and the boy added, ‘Would you mind taking off the ribbon and letting them see the stone?’

Olga slipped the ribbon over her head, and Raymond, with his father’s consent, carried the ring round to each member of the Council in turn. All appeared astonished, and one or two showed a desire to take the ring into their own hands for closer examination. This Raymond would not allow, till he reached an old monkey who appeared to be the President. He handed the treasure to him with a low bow, and stood by while he inspected it.

The patriarch gave a deep ‘Ah-h!’ which seemed to express even more satisfaction than

surprise, and addressed a few words to the Duke, who, turning to Olga, said,

‘It is as I thought. Handaman, the President of our Council, is descended from the keeper of the ducal treasures, who was transformed into an ape like the other officers of the household at the time of our exile. He brought with him certain precious relics, and amongst them a pink marble casket said to contain instructions as to how we may recover all that we lost. No one has hitherto been able to break it open.

‘Handaman now tells me that the tradition handed down from father to son in his family is that a golden-haired child with a baby boy should some day come to the Island and bring with her a ring bearing the emblem of our house, and that this ring should open the casket.’

‘He said something else, papa,’ remarked Raymond.

‘Never mind that, my boy,’ said his father, smiling.

‘I do mind,’ murmured Raymond; and he whispered to his companion, ‘He said she should be the bride of the heir.’

‘What nonsense,’ returned Olga. ‘We have something else to attend to at present.’

So it appeared ; for a fresh and still more lively debate began among the monkeys, at the end of which Ludovic informed Olga that it was decided that the Council should go immediately to the underground chamber in which the treasures were kept, and that if she would consent to do so, she herself should touch the casket with the ring in their presence and witness the result.

Olga readily agreed ; and the Duchess thoughtfully added that the expedition might frighten Eric, and that it would be better for him to play in the Palace garden with Mustard and two of the ladies while they were away.

Raymond and Olga therefore took him back to the Duke's house, and left him perfectly content, while they returned to the Council Hall and found all the monkeys anxiously awaiting them, with torches to light them down the flight of steps and through the dark galleries leading to the Treasure House. The Treasure House itself was a long, low, vaulted chamber, and all round were iron rings or brackets into which the monkeys thrust their torches. The ducal guards stood at the entrance to keep out all intruders, while the councillors, under Handaman's directions, removed one

padlocked box after another, till they disclosed a secret recess in which was placed what was evidently the greatest of all the treasures, the pink marble casket.

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He returned the ring, which he had hitherto held, to the little girl, and said something which Ludovic explained :—

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The monkeys looked as gloomy as it is possible for monkeys to look, and hope was rapidly fading into despair, when Raymond, who had been wandering round in an aimless manner, took it into his head to peer into the recess whence the box had been taken, and exclaimed :

'Why, there are some letters carved here, right at the back ! Bring a light, quick !'

The councillors understood human language perfectly though they could not speak it, and one ran forward with a torch. Raymond, after a little puzzling, made out this verse—

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Not a moment did Olga hesitate. She hastily kissed the ring, and thrice touched the casket with the signet. The result was instantaneous. The lid of the casket flew open as if a hidden spring had been pressed, and disclosed to the eager spectators a roll of yellow parchment. Handaman took it out and gave it to the Duke with a low bow. Raymond squeezed Olga's hand and the Duchess kissed her while Ludovic read aloud as follows—

*To the children of the Rose City. You will bear these words
far from the land of your Fathers.*

Know then that your home lies between the Black Mountains, the Great Forest and the Plains of Mandania, where the country of the Princes of Lorlonia joins the country of the King. To seek it sail to the shore where the forest meets the sea. Land where two tall marble columns mark a roadstead which was once the port of the Rose City.

March straight to the north till you see the Black Mountains rising to the east. Then, as you leave the forest, the Crimson City will lie before you.

Let those who go bear the swords of their fathers, and attack the City before sunrise on the last day of the old year, for thus only can you conquer.

Let her who unseals the casket go with you to unseal the spring wherein if you bathe you shall once more be as your forefathers.

When you have won, bring back those left in the island and let them do likewise.

This is the doom and destiny which courage can fulfil. In the hour of triumph be merciful to the vanquished, and faithful to the Princes of Lorlonia, for your fate is enwoven with theirs.



**"AH, QUEEN," SAID HE,
"IS ALL LOST? WHERE
SHALL I FIND REST?"**

a living rose-tree when touched by the first beams of the sun.

As she advanced the old man rose from his couch and bowed low before her, saying—

‘This is your day, O Queen! Once every year you come to rouse me from my slumber. Queen of the Dawn, what would you with the Master of Dreams?’

‘Master,’ replied the Queen, ‘your reign in this city is ended. The spell is broken, and the victor is here. For three hundred years your dwarfs have served you, and Night has kept Life away from the city and the forest. At length the rightful lord has fulfilled the prophecy, and has met the Queen of the Dawn at sunrise on the last day of the year. Now the gold-haired child has but to unseal the Magic Fountain, and the sons of those who were enchanted by the Lord of Dreams shall have their own once more.’

The old man knelt at her feet.

‘Ah, Queen,’ said he, ‘is all lost? Where shall I find rest, and send my dreams abroad into the world?’

‘Go,’ said she, ‘summon your dwarfs and bid them cease their clamour. Let them follow

you through the Great Forest to the shores of the sea. There the ivory boats await you, and you will pass away in them to the Country of the Mist.'

The old man bowed again, and sighing deeply, passed down the marble stairs by which Ludovic had come up. Ludovic, in blank amazement, turned to the Queen, who said—

'Follow ;' and led him also to the central hall.

Dwarfs and monkeys alike stood speechless with astonishment as the dreaded Master and the lovely Queen, with her attendant elves, entered into their midst ; but the dwarfs soon realised their fate.

The Duke bade the monkeys unbind them and let them go. The door was thrown open and all tumult ceased as the Enchanter for the first time during three centuries left the Palace walls. Silently he went forth, silently his people followed him, and left for ever the Rose City to live and dream far off in the Country of the Mist.

'Now,' said the Queen, 'fetch the child with the ring ; you must have brought her or you would not be here. Then I will show you the

fountain, and my task will be done. It is only on this day that I come to the Rose City. Then I go to visit my sister the Queen of the Twilight, who lives in the Valley of Wishes, and so I pass on my way to other lands.'

She said the last words to Ludovic unheard by Raymond ; for the moment that the order to 'fetch the child' had been given, he had dashed away with six monkeys in search of Olga.

The little girl had been left at a safe distance from the city in charge of the four monkeys who carried her chair. They were part of the ship's crew, and had accompanied the army as her special attendants.

Raymond found her in a great state of anxiety. She had heard the cries of the combatants, and had seen in the distance the long procession of little white men and women passing away into the forest. Now her joy and relief were great when she heard that the victory was complete, and that it only remained for her to come with her precious ring and unseal the Magic Fountain.

'Welcome, little one,' said the Queen of the Dawn, when Olga was led into her presence ;

‘you have done much and have still much to do, yet do not fear, for the omen of to-day is happy.’

She led the way through gardens, fair even in winter, and fairer still by their promise of the spring, till they came to a vast enclosed space with a wall all round it. No door was visible, and within was heard the murmur of falling waters.

‘Do you remember,’ said the Queen, smiling at Olga, ‘how you opened the casket?’

Olga smiled in return, and kissing the signet pressed it thrice against the marble wall. A heavy door, hitherto unseen, immediately swung back, and disclosed a large bath with a fountain playing in the centre.

With one accord the soldier monkeys rushed into the water, and in a few minutes issued—apes no longer, but gallant knights clothed in complete armour! The four sailors followed their example, and were with equal promptitude transformed into sturdy blue-jackets.

The knights at once knelt before Ludovic and proffered him their oaths of fealty, and he and Raymond in turn did homage to Olga as heiress of Lorlonia, and renewed their vow that

their first enterprise should be to restore Eric to his Principality.

Then all turned with warm thanks and offers of service to the Queen of the Dawn.

She answered graciously that she rejoiced in their happiness, and must now be gone.

‘To you, Princess Olga,’ she added, ‘I repeat, be brave still as you have been hitherto. Your task is not yet over. I go where you see those two black peaks rising in the east. Few can distinguish them, fewer still can reach them. They are the portals of the Black Gorge. I know not whether you may yet have cause to seek them, it would be a hard journey for one so young, but remember my words, for you at least behold them.’

Olga kissed the Queen’s hand, and then fixed her eyes on the black peaks. Even while she looked, the Queen with all her train passed suddenly away, and not one of the company could say whither she had gone.

‘Now,’ said Ludovic, ‘the first step is won, and we may rest awhile. Let us go into the Palace where, if I mistake not, the dwarfs have left goodly remnants of their feasts. We shall none of us be sorry for breakfast.’

This proposal met with universal applause, and the meal was in progress with merry jests and laughter, when a clatter of horse's hoofs was heard in the avenue, and a shout of 'What ho ! is any one within ?' One of the knights hastened to the door and saw a youth of about fifteen, splashed with mud and looking pale and exhausted.

'Can you tell me where to find Princess Olga of Lorlonia ?' he cried.

'She is here,' answered the knight. 'Come in and rest yourself, and she will give you audience.'

'I have no time to rest,' replied the boy ; 'I must speak with her at once. Could any one give my horse a feed and rub down meanwhile ?'

The knight called one of the sailors, and told him to do his best for the horse, while he took the messenger into the hall.

'Why, George !' exclaimed Olga, instantly recognising that luckless page. 'How did you come here ?'

George knelt and kissed her hand, then rising said—

'I have pressing news for your Highness's private ear.'

‘I think you had better tell Duke Ludovic and his son Raymond also,’ replied the little girl. ‘They are my friends and guardians, and if your news is important I shall need their advice.’

The page having consented, the Duke insisted that he should eat a piece of bread and drink a cup of wine, and then all four went into the smaller hall, where George related as briefly as he could the events which had happened since the Hospodar wrote to Olga. Jagellon had done his best to assemble an army to march against Vladimir, but had found great difficulty. Most of the knights and nobles were unwilling to begin a campaign in the autumn, and wished to await the return of the spring, when the King might be expected back from his distant expedition, and might take the whole question in hand. Few believed that the children were away in Monkey Island; some thought that Vladimir himself had hidden them; others that they had been stolen and concealed by Macovros or other friends of their own.

Some gave Count Vladimir credit for being really friendly to Eric, and others had been won over to his side by bribes or promises.

The Hospodar regarded himself as pledged to meet Olga in December, and hoped that at least no one else would interfere, and that he and Vladimir would be left to fight the matter out on equal terms. Here also he was unfortunately deceived. Once master of Lorlonia, the Count had far larger resources at his command than his opponent ; besides, he was on the spot, while Jagellon had to bring his men from a distance. Sir Witold and several of his acquaintance brought troops, and when Jagellon met the traitors near Mandania, the frontier town, he and his men were largely outnumbered. George and some others who had escaped from the Castle of Lorlonia had gathered as many friends as they could and had joined the Hospodar.

‘If we had had you and Prince Eric with us,’ he continued, ‘we could have raised the country. As it was, people did not know whom to believe, or what to think. The end of it was that the battle was fought yesterday, and though our men were as brave as lions, and the Hospodar fought like a Paladin, we got the worst of it, and had to fall back on a neighbouring stronghold. Vladimir did

not gain much advantage, however, and the battle has delayed his plans. Now I have come post-haste to tell you that that scoundrel Nicholas is dead, and has sent you a message.'

'Nicholas dead, and sent me a message!' exclaimed Olga, more and more astonished.

'Yes. This is how it came about. He had been annoyed with Count Vladimir for some time. He had been his adviser and helped him in everything, and thought that the Count did not treat him properly. Just before the battle he went to head-quarters and demanded to be at once invested, in the presence of the principal captains and leaders, with the fief of Tortosima, which he said had been promised him long ago. Count Vladimir gave an evasive answer, Nicholas lost his temper, angry words passed. At last Sir Witold jumped up and said—

'Why not tell him the truth, Vladimir? You can give him something else, but you cannot give him Tortosima as you have already given it to me.'

'Nicholas was furious, and left the tent vowing vengeance against both brothers-in-law. He went to his quarters, summoned half-a-dozen soldiers who were his personal

followers, and left the camp, meaning to desert to the Hospodar.

‘Sir Witold evidently suspected something of the sort, for he sent a couple of squires after him, who caught sight of him as he was approaching our lines. One of the squires shot an arrow at him which wounded him mortally. His men picked him up and rode forward to our ranks, carrying a white cloth on the end of a spear as a flag of truce. Our sentries let them pass, seeing that their leader had been wounded by the enemy, and just then I rode up in attendance on the Hospodar.

‘Nicholas knew me, and called to me in a faint voice that if I loved my master’s children I should come and hear what he had to say before he died. Jagellon gave me leave, telling me to rejoin him as soon as possible. Nicholas told me of his quarrel with Vladimir, and added : “This I know ; to-morrow night he means to pass the Black Gorge into the Valley of Wishes. He learnt from the enchanter of the Rose City that whoso first crosses the stream at the foot of those mountains after the bell tolls the passing of the old year will gain the fulfilment of any wish formed during the past

twelve months. He has wished to have Eric in his power, and will claim that wish. Rumour says that Princess Olga is somewhere in this country. If you can find her and tell her this, she may yet be beforehand with the Count. The chance is small, and I care not much what happens, yet I would rather she should gain the day than that my ungrateful master should triumph. I did all for him, and my death lies at his door." Having said this, he died.

'I galloped back to the Hospodar, and found him already advancing to battle, so I could not tell him what I had heard till the fight was over.

'Then he told me that you might possibly be here, and that I could learn more at the quarries. I reached them this morning, and was obliged to rest my horse, while I found, with some difficulty, a quarryman willing to give me information as to where this city lay.'

'Then,' said Olga, who had hung breathless on every word, 'I must cross the stream before Vladimir. The Queen of the Dawn said I might have to go, and it is the only way of saving Eric. I know where the Black Gorge lies. It is now nearly noon, and I have twelve

hours before midnight strikes. I must start at once.'

'How will you go, my dear?' said the Duke. 'A child like you cannot cross those dismal mountains. Let me go instead. I will wish now whatever you desire, and claim the fulfilment there.'

'No,' replied Olga; 'the Queen said few could reach the Valley, and that I could. Besides, no one can do it in time unless they ride. You are heavier than I am, and I should have a better chance if George will lend me his horse.'

'Gladly, Princess,' answered the page; 'but I fear my horse would never do the distance in twelve hours. He was in the battle yesterday, and I rode him almost all last night. If you could possibly have a strong pony, he would be much more useful in those mountain paths. I will go with you.'

'No, you won't,' said Raymond; 'you are quite done up, and it is my turn now. Just wait a minute.' He was out of the hall before any one could stop him, and back again directly.

'I saw some ponies,' he announced, breathless

from haste, 'as we came here, grazing on the edge of the forest. I have sent the sailors and some of the other men to catch two as quickly as possible. You lend us your saddle, and I will put it on one, and rig up a pillion for Olga to sit behind me. We will lead the other with us to change in case the first gets tired by the time we reach the foot of the mountains. Then we will let the first go, and we will be over the stream before Vladimir, never fear.'

CHAPTER XII

THE VALLEY OF WISHES

THE young moon shed her soft rays on two travellers who were toiling up a stony path between the frowning peaks which guarded the Black Gorge.

The girl rode a shaggy pony, while the boy had dismounted and trudged stoutly at her side.

‘It’s all right, Olga,’ said he, ‘we are in plenty of time. The night is so clear and frosty that the great bell which tolls the hours in the city sounds even here. Listen !’

As he spoke the deep tones rang out, and the children counted ten.

‘You see,’ continued Raymond, ‘we are near the top of the Pass now, and it will be easy enough going down. Are you very tired ?’

‘Oh no, but you must be ; you have walked all the way from the foot of the mountain.’

‘Not a bit of it. It is much easier than riding two on a pony uphill—and safer too.’

Another half hour brought them to the summit, and they paused to look down on either side. The descent before them seemed fairly simple. There was no beaten track, but the dry bed of a mountain stream wound between large stones and low grassy banks till it disappeared in the mist which overhung the valley beneath ; and from the mist arose a murmuring sound which they took to be the noise of the stream which Olga was to cross when midnight was past.

They turned to look at the path by which they had climbed with great toil and difficulty. It was so steep and rugged that Olga had often proposed to leave the pony and clamber up on foot. To this Raymond would not consent ; he had insisted on dragging the pony up after him, and was now very proud of his success.

‘Look !’ cried Olga suddenly, in a low and alarmed tone. ‘What is that ?’

Raymond gave a suppressed whistle.

‘No doubt about it, I am afraid. It is your

scoundrel of a cousin. Well, he is coming up the mountain with two other fellows, and they all have heavy war-horses. We did not think the way up particularly easy, and where a pony stumbles a charger is uncommonly likely to fall. Come along, Olga. They had better not see us, for, though they would find it hard to catch us, if they did manage it we should not be very heavy weights to pitch over a precipice.'

Olga needed no second invitation to make good speed, and as the bell sounded eleven, they found themselves enveloped in mist and standing on the brink of the stream which formed the boundary of the Valley of Wishes.

'You must not cross yet,' said Raymond in a voice trembling with excitement. 'The best thing to do will be to choose the easiest place to get over, and then to hide quietly till we hear the bell toll again. Then you can stand ready and jump across the moment the twelfth stroke has sounded.'

'How clever you are !' answered Olga ; and tired as they were the children walked slowly along the bank till they found a place where one or two large rocks might act as stepping stones.

Raymond crossed forwards and backwards to test them, and pronounced them quite satisfactory.

‘It is warmer here than above,’ said he, ‘let us sit down to rest, and eat the remainder of our bread.’

They did so, and talked quietly together, while the pony cropped the short grass near them, till they heard voices at the top of the Pass.

‘They are there,’ whispered Olga in a tone of alarm. ‘I expect it is about half-past eleven and they will be down in time.’

‘They may be down in time,’ whispered Raymond in return; ‘but we are here first, and have found the best place to cross.’

‘Vladimir is a strong man and could jump the stream anywhere,’ replied the little girl nearly crying.

‘Don’t be afraid, only be ready,’ said the boy in a consoling manner. ‘Keep quite still now while I lead the pony further off and tie him to a tree. We must not let them suspect that we are here, and then they won’t be in such a hurry.’

Raymond did as he proposed, and then returned to Olga. The voices heard from time

to time were coming nearer, and at last the boy whispered, 'They have left their horses and are coming fast. I know what I will do. You see that large rock close to where the Count will jump the stream, if he arrives, as is most likely, just in time? I will go and hide behind it, and if he tries to cross at the same time you do, I will leap out and catch hold of his leg. Of course he is stronger than I am; but a minute's delay will make the difference.'

'He may hurt you!'

'He will have no time to attend to me. Stay where you are, I must go at once before they are near enough to see me.'

Olga's heart almost stood still with terror when Raymond left her on what she felt to be a dangerous errand. Alone in the middle of the night, all depended on her courage and agility. A false step and Vladimir would win. What would that mean to Eric?

The voices were quite close now; she could hear the Count say to his companion, 'We are here, Witold; we win this venture also, and then all is ours.'

'Right, Vladimir,' replied the other, as the three men gained the level ground.



TEN—ELEVEN—TWELVE!
OLGA SPRANG TO THE
FIRST STONE.

‘Listen!’ cried the squire who attended them.

The first stroke of the midnight bell : One—two—three—

Olga rose to her feet. Vladimir drew nearer to the stream.

Four—five—six.

As the notes sounded, the Count exclaimed,

‘Here is the place!’

Seven—eight—nine.

‘You can jump it easily,’ cried Witold.

Ten—eleven—Twelve!

Olga sprang to the first stone.

The Count would have cleared the whole stream while she did so, had not Raymond shot like an eel from behind the rock. He caught Vladimir’s leg as he was in the very act of leaping, and her enemy fell head foremost into the water as Olga safely gained the further shore.

Witold seized Raymond, while the squire hastened to help his master. The boy, however, had not lived with monkeys so many years for nothing. With a jerk he twisted himself out of the knight’s grasp and leapt the stream before the Count was on his feet again.

The three men followed, but too late.

As the echoes of the great bell died slowly in the mountain-tops the mist rolled away from the valley and a crowd of weird and almost undistinguishable forms thronged to meet the new comers. Tall black beings, and little children dressed in white, were mingled in hopeless confusion with animals, known and unknown, with fair ladies and dark-browed brigands, even with plants and flowers which seemed to have become alive and to desire to join in this strange welcome to the New Year.

‘Come this way,’ they cried, singling out Olga from the men; ‘you were the first to cross the stream. Come this way and see our Queen.’

The Count and his companions were too much astounded by the spectacle to attempt immediate vengeance on Raymond, who quietly took Olga’s hand and led her forward, while the others followed.

They soon perceived two ladies seated on a throne on the top of a little hill, and Olga and Raymond joyfully recognised in one of them their friend the Queen of the Dawn. She was dressed in soft pink draperies woven with threads

of gold which cast light around her whenever she moved. On her head she wore a crown of tiny sunbeams, and she carried a golden sceptre.

Her sister, the Queen of the Twilight, who appeared to bear sway in the valley, wore floating garments of blue and silver, her shadowy veil was fastened to a coronet of stars, and in her hand she held a silver wand.

‘Come hither, child,’ she said kindly. ‘You have fairly won your venture. Now choose wisely and well. All depends upon your choice.’

During the hasty ride of the afternoon, and the weary scaling of the mountain at night, Olga had endeavoured to recall her wishes of the past year. She had tried to frame new ones, yet all she seemed able to say to herself and Raymond was, ‘How I wish Eric were safe and home again!’

What she had wished before she could hardly remember, though she dimly felt that it was no good to her cousin.

Now the Queen bade her stand by her side, and told Raymond and the men to wait behind her while she summoned the wishes of all the mortals present to pass before them.

Raymond’s wishes came first. They were a

cheery band : ponies, a bow and arrows, a suit of armour ; these took quaint and lively shapes as they hurried past. Clearest of all was the floating form of a little girl, and Olga could not help recognising it as a reflection of herself. The Queen smiled, and the Queen of the Dawn said, 'They may be realised yet, Raymond, but my sister cannot give you the choice to-night.'

The wishes of the squire and Sir Witold followed. They were of sterner stuff, and as a dark figure, with a dagger in one hand and a bag of gold in the other, passed by with scowling glances, the Queen of the Twilight remarked—

'It is well for you, Sir Knight, that such a dream of crime and greed is not fulfilled. Wishes like those bring their own punishment.'

Then came the wishes of Vladimir—a princely diadem stained with gore ; a gloomy soldier with downcast eyes, bearing a sceptre ; a veiled form, which seemed to crush a child in its grasp : these and many more, a dark and hideous troop, went by.

The Count himself trembled as his thoughts took shape before his eyes.

‘Would it have been well with you if you had had the choice of one of these?’ said the Queen. ‘Now let Olga’s wishes appear and wait before her; for she must choose which shall be fulfilled to-night. One only cannot be granted. Her mother cannot live on earth again!’

Many a childish wish was there. Fresh flowers in her garden, birds and holidays, a boat in which she might row on the river, and other children to play with. The sad wish lost for ever was there also, and the tears filled Olga’s eyes as she saw it appear.

Last came two wishes, and all started as they took their place. They both bore the likeness of Vladimir. One was ghastly pale as if life had left him; the other was bright and smiling, and bore an infant tenderly in his arms.

‘What are these wishes of yours, my child?’ said the Queen of the Twilight.

Olga turned pale and then flushed rosy red.

‘I think I remember now, your Majesty,’ she answered timidly. ‘When Cousin Vladimir left our castle last summer he asked me what I wished him, and I said I wished him to love Eric really and truly. I suppose that is the wish that holds the baby.’

‘And the other?’

Olga dropped her voice almost to a whisper—

‘I know it was wrong, but I thought he wanted to kill Eric, and I wished he were dead.’

‘You see you thought right,’ broke in Raymond. ‘His wishes showed that he *did* wish to kill Eric, and you too, I expect.’

‘Hush, Raymond,’ said the Queen; ‘she must choose for herself and none may guide her.’

Olga paused. Vladimir had been very cruel, and wished to be more cruel still; yet she could not choose his death. There were her wishes for Eric’s safety, which stood before her as smiling children. She might take one of those, and leave the Count to the vengeance of Duke Ludovic and her other friends. Yet would it not be better even for Eric, and certainly for Vladimir himself, that he too should become the little Prince’s friend? She thought so, and advancing towards the form of Vladimir holding the child, she touched it and said—

‘I choose that Cousin Vladimir shall love Eric really and truly.’

The whole of the thought-figures instantly vanished away, and the real Vladimir, advancing from behind the throne, fell at the child's feet and said—

‘Olga, you shall have your wish. I will love Eric and be his faithful vassal. I thought that this night would be my last when I saw your wishes appear after you had seen all the wickedness of mine. You have saved my life, and you shall see that even I know what gratitude means.’

‘Well chosen, child,’ said the Queen of the Twilight. ‘There are few to whom it is given to choose which of their wishes shall be fulfilled, and fewer still to whom such a choice would be a blessing. If you have friends for whom you care, do not send them to this valley. Let them win the prizes for which they long by honest work and perseverance. A wish formed in anger and gratified in haste may injure an enemy, but will injure far more him who has uttered it. However, this warning is not for you. Your wish was a right and good one, it has secured your brother's rights and won peace for his people. Go home in happiness, and in years to come

may Raymond also have his best wish gratified.'

* * * * *

Nearly seven happy years have hastened by, and the Castle of Lorlonia is the scene of such rejoicing as it never knew before.

On its highest tower floats the Royal Standard, having on one side the Eagle Banner of Lorlonia, and on the other Duke Ludovic's Crimson Rose, for the King himself has come to grace the marriage of Sir Raymond, youngest yet bravest of his knights, with Princess Olga, the fairest lady of his empire, and sister to the most powerful of his princes.

The youthful Eric has met the monarch at his frontier city and ridden with him to the castle, and he now dismounts and holds the King's stirrup while he bids him welcome, and thanks him for the honour done to his house.

Then a gallant throng of nobles, knights, and fair ladies, proudly marshalled by the ancient Seneschal, come forward to greet their sovereign and do him homage. There is the brave Hospodar, rejoicing in the happiness of his little lady, now so tall and beautiful.

There is the good Duke Ludovic and his kindly Duchess, proud of their brave son, and feeling that the dearest wish of their hearts is fulfilled, since he has won the bride whom they destined for him years ago. Their summer home is the Rose City, but they still spend the winter months in their old dominion, now called 'Olga's Isle,' for only one ape, the cantankerous councillor, remains in what was once 'Monkey Island.'

Here are Irene and Xenia, each with a knightly husband, and Count and Countess Macovros, who once more live at the castle, and train up their young Prince with devoted care. They need no longer fear force or guile, for Count Vladimir has kept his vow, and is the most faithful of Eric's many faithful vassals.

George is here, and has become Raymond's favourite squire and friend; while in the background, among the retainers of the Prince who are sharing in the gladness of the day, are Nania and Catherine, and the sturdy Ivan, who says to the head-warder—

'Well, after all, I was right to catch Sir Raymond, for if I had not done it, Princess

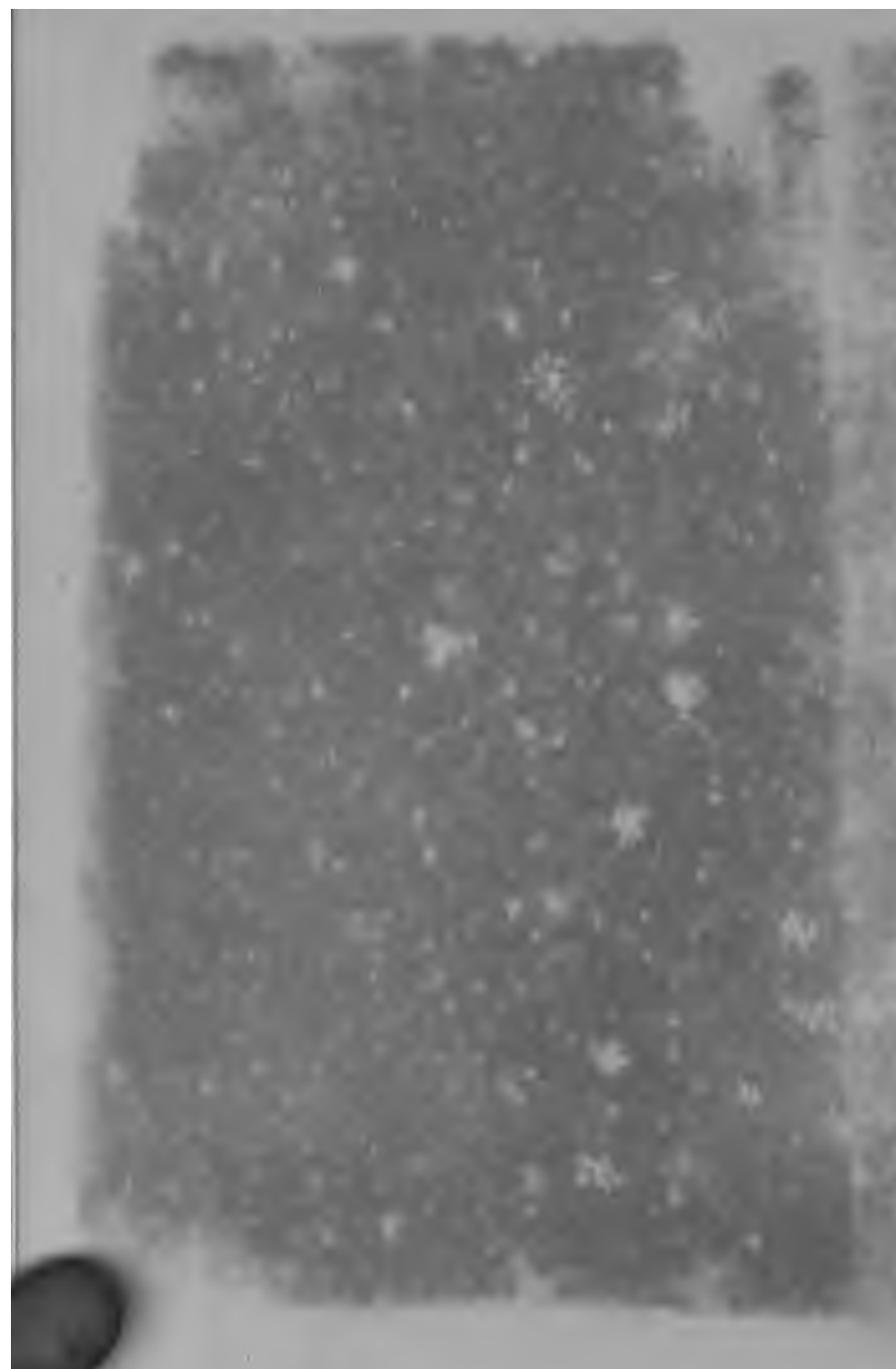
Olga would never have known him ; and I do believe he will make her a good husband, if she does not spoil him.'

And now the King salutes the bride, and throws a chain of diamonds round her neck, while he bids all present unite in his wishes that the true knight Raymond may be ever faithful and fortunate as he was in boyhood, that Olga may gain for herself even more love and homage in her happiness than she won in her misfortune, and that many years of peace and prosperity may attend Eric, Prince of Lorlonia.

THE END.



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